Pangs of Widowhood in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novel *Water*

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Abstract:

*Since the dawn of time, gender inequity and sex discrimination have been the result of the human mentality. Internationally acclaimed author Bapsi Sidhwa has contributed significantly to the field of feminist fiction. Her magnificent novels are a mix of conflict and beliefs, sensibility and dignity, all of which are rooted in the Indian Subcontinent's historical, political, and socio-cultural context. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water*, set against the backdrop of Indian Freedom Movement, questions the orthodox religious traditions and the repressive restraints imposed on Hindu widows, pushing the bounds of India's male-dominated cultural narratives beyond patriarchal predicaments. She exposes the centuries-old practices that oppress women through her internationally acclaimed novels. The novel *Water*'s theme is contentious and complicated. It is about the plight of widows in India in 1930s. *Water* exposes traditional intrinsic indifference, fatalism, and orthodox conventions and injustice to women.*

Key Word- Widow's Plight; Orthodox tradition; Ashram; Deprivation; Mahatma Gandhi

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Through fictitious versions of the experience, literature allows people to record their thoughts and experiences in a way that is accessible to others. Bapsi Sidhwa drafted a sensitive novel called *Water*, which is about injustice towards women in an entirely different setting of colonial India. explicitly sets out women's torment. She writes with immense vigour and liveliness on the marginalized state of wretched widows in *Water*. Widows have been enduring agonies of pitiful life over decades. The novel *Water* is set in late 1930s in India, and it throws light into the plight of a group of widows who are forced to live in dilapidated widow ashram in misery following their husbands' deaths. At that time India was under British rule, young girls were frequently married to older men.

Pakistan's finest English-language novelist Bapsi Sidhwa and Indo- Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta, both renowned creators, have an unusual artistic relationship. Deepa Mehta adapted Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy-Man* for her magnificent film "1947: Earth", and now Bapsi Sidhwa novelizes Mehta's magnificent film "Water". Bapsi Sidhwa says: "The place and characters were already there, but I had to bring the skeletal script and cinematic images to life with words. Besides being a gripping story, the plot deals with a subject close to my heart- that of the oppressive hold tradition has on women, in this case, religious tradition. It

tells of oppression and constraints that govern even a girl -child's life in a patriarchal society. I have always been active in women's issues."

Superb storyteller Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water* throws light into the hardship of Hindu widows who are forced to live in squalor following their husbands' deaths. The novel's narrative sparked a lot of debate and controversy in India. It does deal with hypocrisy of society which regards them as an object of contempt at the same time exploit them. Sidhwa chastised society's double standards, in which widows were isolated but widowers were allowed to remarry. Sidhwa is a true translator of India's conscience, according to the editor of Bloomsbury Review. Her books paint a realistic picture of society's social, psychological and political issues. Her attitude to life, like Naipaul's, is open and frank (Bloomsbury Review3)

From the beginning, the novelist's depiction of the lives of widows in colonial India is engrossing. It chronicles the life of eight-year-old Chuiya a child bride, who is dumped at a ramshackle widow's ashram when her elderly husband dies. As according to Hindu tradition, if a man died, his widow would be obliged to spend the rest of her life in a widow ashram, a place where widows might atone for past sins that allegedly caused their husband's death.

Chuiya's father Somnath is a poor priest who has dedicated his life to preaching the religion's rules and traditions. He chooses to marry his daughter Chuiya to Hira Lal, a forty-four-year-old wealthy widower. When she gets married, her adventurous existence of rambling through woods in quest of gooseberries and leeches comes to an abrupt halt. Mismatched and arranged marriages was prevalent at that period in colonial India, as Chuiya's father says, reprimanding his wife Bhagya; "Outside of marriage the wife has no recognized existence in our tradition. A woman's role in life is to get married and have sons. That is why she is created: to have sons! That is all." (Sidhwa15)

Earlier her mother was against this marriage. Somnath blindly supported the religious texts Somnath reminds his wife about role of women in tradition: "In Brahmanical tradition a woman is recognized as a person only when she is one with her husband. Only then does she become a sumangali, an auspicious woman, and a saubhagyavati, a fortunate woman. "(8) Bhagya was too helpless to save her daughter from early marriage. Bhagya believed her spouse is a god's representative on Earth. It is evident that such a mismatch is accepted and even celebrated by society's traditional framework. Somnath says "A girl is destined to leave her parents' home early or she will bring disgrace to it. She is safe and happy only in her husband's care. "(7)

But after two years, Chuiya was informed that she was no longer alive for her loved ones because her husband had passed away. She was ostracized and sent to a remote, isolated sanctuary for widows, thousands of miles away from her relatives, particularly her mother. She is afflicted by the social constraint according to which demise of her spouse metaphorically marks her own demise as "she ceases[s] to exist as a person, she [is] no longer either daughter or daughter-in-law." (24). She was draped in a white homespun coarse sari, stripped of marriage markers, mangal-sutra and glass bangles. The bangles smashing was the first of

several rites intended to signify her transition into widowhood. This journey is overwhelming: “As the razor scraped across her scalp, Chuiya's teeth were set on edge. Somnath noticed her toes curl, almost reflexively, in mute protest. ”(33-35)

She must stay in ashram to spend the rest of her life in renunciation. Chuiya's father and mother-in-law mercilessly got away “Abandoning the howling child to her fate, Hira Lal's mother, blaming the girl for a karmic debt of past sins that had deprived her of her son. While little Chuiya yelled, trudged back stone – fixed and wailing ‘Baba, don't leave me here! Baba, don't leave me!’” (39) Somnath stood powerless, resigned to his and his daughter's fates. Chuiya's mother-in-law closed the ashram door on her terrified screams and on her life by pulling the rear panel together. Sidhwa points out: "With her white sari and bald, yellow head, Chuiya was a very different child from the girl who had ridden in the bullock cart. "(44) Her ties with her parental home were completely estranged. In ashram, widows were expected to live miserable austere lives.

Sidhwa keep on questioning this bizarre life of deprivation and unhappiness through numerous personalities and situations. Most of the story moves through Chuiya's eyes. Chuiya learns the traditional customs with the passage of time. She accepts her fate and brings life to the ashram. The ashram's gloomy walls become her macroscopic universe, and the inmates become her family members. There she befriends beautiful Kalyani, sane Shakuntala and elderly Bua. All of them represent various states and epochs of existence. Wretched widows of ashram were socially marginalized and had no voice and choice in their cursed life. But protest is basic forte of Sidhwa's buoyant heroines. So, Madhumati, in an attempt to console her through her ordeal, adds that when our husband dies, a wife too dies half-way. So, how can a half-dead woman feel any pain? With child-like outspokenness, Chuiya responds to her widow-in-chief: “Because she's half alive?... 'I don't want to be a stupid widow! Fatty!’” (42).

Woebegone widows' silent screams and cravings for wholeness and salvation is depicted through character of Kalyani and Chuiya. From the age of eight to eighty, life for the widows in ashram was nothing but living in a constant torment, restlessly anticipating death. They were regarded awfully inauspicious. It is noteworthy that most of them belonged to landlord's families. They were, however, abandoned to sing and dance as half-dead zombies living a futile and forlorn life. Sidhwa writes “They had grown so accustomed to begging as they had to the grueling hours of singing in temple halls to earn a few coins and a fistful of rice. Without these handouts, they would starve.” (96)

They were forced to lead an awfully secluded life. Even their shadows were considered hapless. When Shakuntala gets close to a wedding venue in the city, the priest humiliates and shoo her off like a animal. When Kalyani and Chuiya return to the shops after chasing the dog, a shopper makes a remark. “They shouldn't allow widows to run around like this. They bring bad luck to our business” (60). They were confined to ashram and were not permitted to engage in any social activities. Their fate becomes a longing for brightly coloured clothes and delectable desserts.

Innocent Chuyia was too small to realize her status as a widow. Chuiya refused to accept her fate and became a catalyst for change in the lives of the other widows. According to Bapsi Sidhwa, In those days when a woman becomes widow, she loses her useful function in society, the ability to reproduce and perform her nuptial obligations. She was no longer existed as a person; she was neither a daughter nor a daughter-in-law. She had no place in the community and was regarded as a danger and menace to society. "A woman's sexuality and fertility, which [has been] so valuable to her husband in his lifetime [is] converted upon his death into a potential danger to the morality of the community." (24) They were denied the respectable right to exist and survive in society because of the stringent religious taboos. Widows were seen as a curse in the family, and they were not permitted to reside with their relatives. They were deprived of basic necessities of existence; they were stigmatized, and they were permanently segregated from their families.

It is particularly ironic and touching that even women imbibed these laws into their consciousness. When Chuyia inquires innocently "Didi where is the house for men widows?" A pandemonium breaks out. All of the widows become outrageous and she is damned. The dumbfounded widows exploded in a chorus of denunciation. "Good God!" "What a horrible thing to say!" "God protect our man from such a fate!" "May your tongue burn!" "Pull out her tongue and throw it in the river. They shrieked like harpies." (97- 98)

But this incident pricked Shakuntala's conscience. The most compelling character Shakuntala is sympathetic middle-aged widow. The fact that she could read and write all sacred scriptures provided her with comfort and helped her to cope with the sorrow of recollections of dear ones.

Her maternal devotion for Chuiya exposes her strong desire to become a mother, and she therefore achieve wholeness with her. She has an inquisitive mind and frequently inquiries about religion and the fate. She asks priest "there must be a reason for it. Why are we sent here?" (181).

Listening to powerful speech of Mahatma Gandhi Shakuntala discovers that "God is not Truth" but "Truth is God." It is she who contests her doubts, realizes truth. Her journey from innocence to experience is thought provoking. Elderly Bua is another widow whose family discarded her because they did not want to live with ill-fated widow "whose karmas it was eat up her husband." (120). Her sons are ashamed of her as she had to begs in street. Shakuntala contemplated, "Who had turned her into a beggar if not them "(121).

Ashrams becomes a prison of these widows as they were not permitted to engage in any social activity. Their craving for colorful dresses and sumptuous food is never fulfilled. Where there were inadequate portions of food to quell the pangs of hunger. Bua's taste buds were tickled by recollections of tables spread out with colourful and lavish food in her wedding. "What a paltry thing to deny an old woman"(148) commented Sidhwa. When Bua dies after relishing laddu offered by Chuiya. Shakuntala mildly placating perturbed Chuiya says: "After

eating the laddoo she'll go to heaven "and she added wryly, "God willing, she'll be reborn as a man!" (117)

Kalyani is a lovely young widow, who is forced into prostitution by heartless Madhumati. Her income aids in running the ashram and opium addiction of Matriarch Madhumati. When the gorgeous Kalyani falls in love with a young, upper-class Gandhian idealist Narayan. She dreams of happy future. Celibacy and purity are associated with widowhood. So, the forbidden love relationship goes against so called traditional norms and threatens to upset the ashram's fragile power dynamics.

Kalyani's plight is most pitiful that evokes the essence of goddess Durga in Shakuntala. In the novel Chuiya states many times "You are my Durga." (90). Although they were emblems of purity and chastity, they were forced into prostitution in order to support the ashram. Kalyani was forced into this pit at the very young age. "We must live in purity to die in purity," said Madhumati, disregarding the hypocrisy in preaching this to a young woman forced into prostitution against her will." (144) These hollow words were devious means to fulfill her selfish motives. Realizing the hypocrisy of shackles of orthodox traditions agitated Shakuntala unlocks the doors and liberates Kalyani from the captivity of Madhumati to unite with her reformist lover Narayan. But Kalyani's dreams are thwarted When she discovers that her would be father-in-law prestigious Dwarkanath has fulfilled his sexual desire on her. Narayan remains constant in his Love for Kalyani and confronts his adulterous father.

Sidhwa exposes the bitter fact through Gandhian idealist Narayan, that in that society even the elite men could not sympathize with widows living in renunciation and abstain themselves from lust to practice much advocated self – control. She portrays differentiated perspectives of two generations, where father stands for a society which is responsible for the degradation of woman and son Narayan stands to protect woman from the dirty clutches of widowhood and misery. "Kalyani knew that she had no choice; there was only one avenue open to her. Caste out in the street she would die but to live without Narayan and return to a life of forced prostitution would be a worse kind of death". (177)

Kalyani returns to the ashram compound, but ruthless Madhumati just wants to sell her more. Kalyani drowns herself in the holy river, despondent by her predicament and apparently lost love. On her cremation Shakuntala reflect dejectedly about Kalyani's brief existence, which was marred by injustice and a tragic fate. She contemplates over the true gist of widows' life and daringly enquires from priest Sadananda "Pandit – ji, is it written that widows should be treated badly?" (157).

The bleak portion of the novel reaches when Chuyia is sent away with Gulabi a pimp as the prostitute across the river. Innocent Chuyia had been drugged and brutally molested. Shakuntala clutches Chuyia to her bosom, urgently hoping to hand the child up to one of Gandhi's disciples at the railway station. She hands her over to Narayan, who is a participant in Mahatma Gandhi's procession for India's independence.

Bapsi Sidhwa is able to illustrate the life of widows because of her inquisitive attitude, astute observations, and reactivity to situations. Novel *Water* ends up with optimistic hope of the rescue of a child-widow Chuiya. Shakuntala saves her from the hell. This indomitable courage and fight for survival is the forte of Sidhwa's women protagonists.

The novel's premise is a scathing indictment of women's exploitation, segregation, and sexual oppression. The central theme of novel is to depict the bleak existence of widows. They are prohibited the most basic necessities of existence and used by upper cast men to satiate their carnal hunger. The novel explores patriarchy, theology, hypocrisy, destitution, child prostitution, and the mistreatment of women.

Women are enslaved by power, the economics, and gender. Keeping widow at house would be costly, and it would surge the accountability and expenditure. As a result, they were forsaken in to Widow ashram. Narayan explains this mindset to Shakuntala that when widows are segregated from their family and property, they have “One less mouth to feed, four saris, one bed to let- somewhere a corner saved for another widow. There is no other reason. Disguised as religion, it’s just about money.” (209).

This gripping portrait of widows in colonial India is eventually a tragic and poetic tale of love, devotion, and salvation. Position of women specifically the widow’s plight in subcontinent is realistically portrayed in novel. The patriarchy's fetishizing attitude towards culture and religion in order to achieve hegemonic control over the female body and lives is examined. It depicts the restraints that women face in marriage and widowhood. It exposes males’ desire to control female sexuality. Time magazine writes “Water is a triumph.”

The enslaving hypocrisy of a patriarchal culture that has existed for thousands of years is attacked by Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *Water*. It uncovers the centuries-old conventions that victimize and exploit women. Sidhwa's novel *Water* not only complements the Deepa Mehta’s film, but it also stands on its own. In fact, it is more gripping and forceful than the film. Throughout the narrative, Sidhwa exhibits the cruelties of religious tradition against widows. The exploitation of widows by wealthy and upper cast people is explored with sense and sensibility in this story. How greed of own family members is responsible for misfortune of widows is also exposed.

Afreen Faiyaz observes about *Water* that “story is still just as relevant as a reminder of how unthinking adherence to tradition can lord it over reason and humanity. Thankfully, spreading of awareness by socialists like Deepa Mehta and Bapsi Sidhwa as well as other feminists, along with education and right interference of government, these inhuman practices have been brought under control.” In today’s India the emphasis is on protecting and educating the girl-child, as well as encouraging widow-remarriage. We hope that more educated social activists and writers join them in the fight to keep our civilization from sinking to unfathomable depth.

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