

**THE PLIGHT OF WIDOWHOOD THROUGH THE LENS OF BAPSI SIDHWA'S WATER**

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**Abstract:**

This paper deals with the plight of widowhood that is explicitly portrayed by Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *Water*. *Water*, a book by Sidhwa, exposes the centuries-old conventions that oppress women. It deals with the situation of widows in India in the year 1935 and their marginalization after becoming a widow. Their innate apathy, fatalism, and brutality in the clutches of Orthodox Hinduism are exposed by Bapsi Sidhwa. Untold realities abound among marginalized voices, and are truths that are dynamic, challenging the power systems. The novel depicts the hardship of widowed women in ancient times, as well as male dominance in society.

*Water*, by Bapsi Sidhwa, is a tale with a serious social message. The role of women is discussed in this work and the evolution of women's inherent feminine identity and the desire for selfhood is at the heart of her works. The novels are about the repressive norms, traditions, and religious systems in which women are subjected to live.

**Keywords:** Friendships, Feminine Identity, Love, Marginalization, Marriage, Widow.

In the novels of women writers from the Indian subcontinent, such as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Rama Mehta, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Nayantara Sahgal, Taslima Nasreen, and Bapsi Sidhwa, the struggle to establish one's own identity, assert one's individuality, and the desperate fight to exist as a separate entity appears in all its intensity. These writers bring in originality, variety and local flavors of the land and have painted an accurate image of women's roles in the family, society, relationships, and customs.

The emergence of feminist fiction – feminist in the sense of being created by women as well as in the sense of giving voice to the pain, desire, and assertion of women in a male-dominated society – has been one of the most striking features of contemporary English literature from the Indian subcontinent. Bapsi Sidhwa, an internationally famous Indian subcontinent author, was born in Pakistan and, like other female writers, uses fiction to express her feminist views.

Until 1947, India and Pakistan had a similar literary and cultural history, but after partition, they diverged in terms of trends and successes. Women authors in Pakistan have typically been sidelined twice as much as males. Bapsi Sidhwa was one of the first Pakistani women to write fiction in English and to have it published globally. Bapsi Sidhwa, and subsequently Kamila Shamsie and Sara Saleri, found ready-publishers and willing readers outside of Pakistan before being 'known' in their home country.

Bapsi Sidhwa was born in Karachi, a British territory of India, in 1938. She was raised in Lahore, the Punjab capital that later became part of the Pakistan. Sidhwa was nine years old when India was partitioned in 1947. She is an author who is both Pakistani and American. Gujarati and Urdu are her primary languages, although she also writes in English. *Crackling India*, *The Ice- Candy Man*, *The Crow Eaters*, *The Bride*, and *Water* are Sidhwa's best-known works. Her writings frequently deal with her experiences as a Parsi, Punjabi, Pakistani, and American woman. All of Sidhwa's works, she says, have some autobiographical components. She selects major events from her own or other people's lives and flashes them out to create a wider fictional world.

Sidhwa's *Water* was published in 2006. This work is a satire on society's treatment of women. It presents a sordid image of widowhood with brutal facts and bare realism. Meera Khanna's book *Living Dead: Widowhood Trauma in India* depicts the life of a widow and the traditional constraints that are imposed on her:

The widow is 'uglified' to deprive her of the core of her femininity. It is an act symbolic of castration. She is deprived of the red dot between her eyebrows that proclaims her sexual energy." Widows seem to follow rules based on tradition because they have internalized them. They keep doing what other widows did without asking, resigned to a kind of fate—such as placing restrictions on their own diets. Orthodox Hindus believe that onions, garlic, pickles, potatoes, and fish fuel sexual passions by stimulating the blood, but these are the same foods necessary to avoid malnutrition or even death...In much of Indian society—across caste and religion—a widow is often perceived by family members to be a burden and sexually threatening toward marriages. (qtd.in Sahoo, 46)

Sidhwa as a writer feels motivated to utilize writing as a tool for expressing her thoughts and the complexities of a female character's life. In doing so, she demonstrated her fortitude in the face of male domination and the unavoidable constraints imposed by society that determine women's position, status, and role. Sidhwa expresses her ideas about gender inequality in an interview with Gaurav Sood: "... I imagine that as women, consciously or unconsciously, we bring out the problems and discrimination women face and project our aspirations. I don't like to preach about feminism, but the way the stories unfold illustrate their position in the family and society" (2).

*Water*, her most recent work, is set in 1938 when Mahatma Gandhi's modern ideals endangered colonial India's customs. Marginalization is a feeling of powerless exclusion that a group feels as a result of unequal distribution of power structures in society. *Water* talks about the marginalization of widows, remarriage and love that are forbidden to them. The space these women belong to in society makes them powerless, trapped, alienated and pushed to the margins. Hindu widows in India are portrayed as helpless victims of traditional customs and superstitions. Even in contemporary society 'widow' is observed as a social evil which is rightly said by MohiniGiri a veteran activist for women's rights as: "Widowhood is a state of social death, even among the higher castes. Widows are still accused of being responsible for their husband's death, and they are expected to have a spiritual life with many restrictions which affect them both physically and psychologically" (qtd. in Sahoo, 45).

*Water* conjures up a dark and austere atmosphere of a religious community, raising a lot of challenging circumstances that revolve around patriarchy. The story is particularly disturbing as it portrays the life of an eight-year-old widows' life.

The daughter of an impoverished Brahmin priest named Somnath, Chuiya in the opening of the story is a six-year-old girl married to her 44-year-old husband Hiralal. *Water* chronicles the life of this girl widow Chuiya, after the death of her elderly husband who stayed abandoned as a widow. As penitence, she had to remain in the ashram till her death. Bapsi Sidhwa reveals orthodox Hinduism's innate apathy, fatalism, and violence. "The carefree young girl, spends the entire day in the lap of nature and scampering around her mother. Wherein her fate has turned upside down and she reaches a place where she was surrounded by dead, hounded by death, by the constant stench of funeral pyres"(114). Chuiya's mother Bhagya's sensitivities are well-projected by Sidhwa's pervasive uneasiness with women's condition in Indian culture, despite her meticulous belief in the standards given down by her society and faith. The passive Bhagya is enraged at Somnath's choice of Chuiya for Hira Lal. Her kid is still too little as she says and she can't bear the thought of her leaving the house so soon. Somnath reminds her of the role of women: "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).

Nonetheless, Bhagya despises the prospect of her young daughter marrying an older man. She approaches her husband with bravado, saying: “And you think that man will be able to satisfy her Sri-svavahava? By the time her womanhood Blooms, he'll be old and spent” (8). As observed in the writings of Gail Omvedt in the article *Caste, Class, and Women's Liberation in India* has depicted the tradition of India and the upper- caste women as, “Upper-caste women thus ideally were married before puberty, passed from the control of their fathers to that of their husbands and then to their sons, were secluded in the household and forbidden remarriage, their lives widows were miserable” (44).

Chuiya is a youngster who sees marriage as a tantalizing promise of new clothing, delicacies, and the opportunity to be the center of attention. Chuiya was told that she had ceased to exist for her loved ones since her spouse's death, even before marriage could register its significance on her senses. She is shunned and sent to a remote, isolated ashram for widows, thousands of miles away from her relatives, particularly her mother.

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, trudged back stone – fixed and grieving, while Chuiya screamed, 'Baba, don't leave me here! Baba, don't leave me!' Somnath stood helpless, resigned to his fate and the fate of his daughter. Hira Lal's mother pulled the black panels together and firmly shut the door of the ashram on his daughter's fearful cries and her life. (39)

In the novel 'Water,' Sidhwa creates a sensitive scenario that covers practically all elements of terrible widowhood and unjust treatment of unhappy women. The characters in the story Chuiya, Kalyani, Shakuntala, Patirajji (Bua), and Madhumati are all subjected to society's harsh retribution in various ways. Sidhwa's ability to communicate a point, without emphasizing it is one of her greatest abilities. She wonderfully depicts the wretched situations of widows in ashrams who live in utter denial of existence.

Despite the fact that the story is about the hardships of widowhood, Chuiya's stage of life depicts the worry and weight that parents face in the given time period when they have a daughter: “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).

For an orthodoxically puritanical father and priest the conspicuous idea of daughter's sexual desires is explicitly referred. He is even reminded of his ancestral counsel which Sidhwa expresses as, “The Brahmin elders were right: women are dangerous. They sapped a man's strength and stood between him and salvation”(8),

When Bhagya confronts her husband against the marriage of their daughter. Somnath chastises Bhagya saying that:

You are the wife and daughter of Brahmin priests; surely you are aware of our traditions, 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's all!(8-9)

Bhagya is taken aback by her husband's censure, apologizes and agrees to his request. Motherhood has been molded to fit into the system by society. Bhagya kept additional quantities of food for her boys and was still concerned about their health, but Chuiya's little physique was laden with home responsibilities. Bhagya's heart brims with love for Chuiya as she watches her sleep, despite the fact that she isn't used to lavish love and attention on her daughter. She wonders how she could be partial to her sons as a mother, lavishing all her time on them despite the fact

that Chuiya was a mirror image of her upbringing. Bhagya is aware that her daughter will only be a visitor to her family home as she would be belonging to her husband's place. She kisses the gorgeous daughter's forehead in a rush of love, "Flesh of my flesh, the beautiful fruit of my womb: her gaze lingered on her daughter's face" (10).

As Bhagya snapped her finger to ward off the evil eye on her young child the tradition and age-old beliefs bubbled up the emotion in the mother's heart. The evil eye on the other hand had a disastrous impact on Chuiya's fate. Chuiya's treatment after her husband's death and adjusting to widowhood is particularly heartbreaking: "... 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).

Chuiya the protagonist is a rebellious character. When Madhumati tries to console Chuiya in her distress by saying a lady is half dead if her husband dies then Chuiya responded but how can the alive feel the pain if she is half dead? Chuiya responded promptly as: "Because she's half alive?...'I don't want to be a stupid widow! Fatty!'(42) Chuiya unable to comprehend the circumstance is subjected to something she could have never imagined in her wildest dreams. Chuiya finds it uncomfortable to leave behind her parents and she lives in an unknown city but she is convinced and lives with the hope that this battle will end soon and she will be reunited with her family. As the novel proceeds further, Shakuntala informs Chuiya that she can't go home, her simply resigned response was "I know" (116) breaks the reader apart and fills with rage for a harsh and unyielding adult world that doesn't spare a small girl.

The widow's ashram became Chuiya's universe and other fellow widows became her family. Chuiya has a unique bond with each one of them in the ashram and brings a spark to the lives of the widows with her presence. She nuzzled up to Shakuntala, bringing warmth to her relationship. She played hopscotch with irritated Kunti, listened to stories from Bua, kneaded Madhumati's sore legs, provided company to Kalyani, and played hide-and-seek with other widows.

The most powerful character in the novel is Shakuntala. Shakuntala is the one who discovers the truth, overcome with doubts. She frees the widow-prostitute Kalyani to reunite with her lover, and it is Shakuntala who saves Chuiya's life from routine prostitution. She is seen as a character who transformed herself from innocent to one experienced. Despite her firm belief in God, she finds that 'God is not truth but the truth is God'. While Kalyani and Chuiya are oppressed, Shakuntala is one of the round characters. Shakuntala generates an atmosphere of purity and splendor that belongs to a goddess, with severe authority, unusual gravity, doctored aloofness, and real care for those who deserve it. Chuiya declares Shakuntala as, "You are my Durga" (90). And it's true since Sidhwa picked this strong lady to bring Chuiya's independence into reality. Her conscience becomes a struggle for old wisdom's dogmas and her gained rationality, and she triumphs in realizing the ultimate truth. "I am no goddess" (44) she retaliates against Chuiya because she is battling with her conscience to find the ultimate and true meaning to life "There must be a reason for it. Why are we sent here?" (181).

Shakuntala naively followed the scriptures, believing that widowhood was a penalty for previous wicked karmas, and she fervently prayed in atonement at all times. The fact that she could read and write all religious scriptures provided her with comfort and helped her to cope with the sorrow of memories of loved ones. However, a series of events in the lives of widows around her progressively erodes her steadfast commitment to old ideals. Shakuntala mulls over the lives of Bua, Kalyani, and finally herself, attempting to fathom the logic and value of such a life. Through the priest Sadananda she enquires about widowhood and in a sceptic, sense asks whether this is

what god and goddess intended on the plight of widowhood. "Pandit – Ji, is it written that widows should be maltreated?"(157).

Following her husband's death, Shakuntala was exposed to ill-treatment by her own in-laws, revealing the mother-in-law's bitterness. Her stay at her in-laws' house for a year was a living misery:

She was not only viewed as responsible for her husband's death, but also as a threat to her husband's family and, most of all, to that of her dead husband's spirit, simply because of her vital womanhood and potential sexuality. She felt all eyes were constantly watching her, waiting for her to commit some sin that would bring curses on them and consign her husband to hell. (149-150)

Chuiya and the elderly Bua completed a complete cycle of life, symbolizing the women's subjugation regardless of age. We are made aware of the cruel treatment meted out to Bua and the resulting awakenings in Shakuntala's subconsciousness through Shakuntala's perspective at Bua's death. Bua's taste buds were delighted by recollections of tables spread out with colorful and brilliant delights at the wedding whereas in the ashram there is insufficient bit of food to satisfy her hunger. Old Bua, who was always ravenous for food, never missed a chance to recount the minute details of her wedding's lavish display of laddoos and Gulab – jamun. Chuiya buys hot tiny laddoos from her arms in a genuine effort to appease her sweet craving pal. Bua, is roused by the sweet's deep perfume, is perplexed by its appearance. Fearing that it would evaporate like her other fantasies, she devours the tiny globe right away. Chuiya later understands that it was a sin for her when the ailing Bua choked and died. Shakuntala says to Chuiya in a reassuring tone: "After eating the laddoos, she will go to heaven"(117).

Shakuntala, on the other hand, is moved by Kalyani's misery, which invokes the goddess Durga's spirit. Sadananda's announcement of new legislation concerning widow-remarriage enraged her, and it dawned on her that Madhumati had purposefully kept the news from the rest of the ashram. "We must live in purity to die in purity" (144). Madhumati's false statements were nothing more than a ruse to further her own selfish goals. Shakuntala barged into Madhumati's chamber, stole the keys from her, and freed Kalyani to marry Narayan in a flurry of anxious thoughts. The characters of Sidhwa are known for their unwavering tenacity and battle for survival. While saying final prayers during Kalyani's cremation, she reflects on Kalyani's brief existence, which was marred by injustice and sad fate. In her heart, conscience and religion were at odds. Sadananda eventually expresses her confusing views in response to Mahatma Gandhi's remark that he is one of the few persons who listen to his conscience. Shakuntala chose the conscience because Madhumati, who had pimped Chuiya after Kalyani, needed a consistent source of revenue. Shakuntala joins a throng that transports her to the railway station to see Gandhiji, battered Chuiya in her lap, and inner anguish. When Sadananda questioned if she was near to self-liberation, she acknowledged that she wasn't. "If self-liberation means detachment from worldly desires, then no, I'm no closer to it" (95).

Shakuntala passes the small girl over to Narayan as the train departs, saving Chuiya's life from regressing into the regulated life of widows, similar to Kalyani's. Life and hope are validated once more in Sidhwa's story when Shakuntala frees herself from superstitions and restores life to a worthy child.

Chuiya's friend Kalyani is yet another nineteen-year-old young woman, who catches our attention with her misery and haplessness. Her one and only attempt at happiness in her brief life to marry Narayan fails miserably, and she succumbs to her emotional trauma and commits suicide because it was too much for her to bear. Sidhwa's depiction of Kalyani's plight is meant to represent the plight of every woman whose beauty and body have become a curse. She, too, was brought to the ashram wide-eyed and restless, having been widowed at the age of nine. Despite this, she did not have the good fortune to be spared from the upper castes' shady dealings.

Kalyani learned to live with difficulty, defeat less and exhausting until she met Narayan. The problem multiplied after she professed her love for him. The name of Narayan's father, Seth Dwarka Nath, causes Kalyani's life to be cut short. Disillusioned by his respectable father's actions, an agitated Narayan confronts him for his wrongdoing. His vile retort was, "I'm sorry you are disillusioned, son...But you cannot go through life being so idealistic.' ...So, you've found out she's not a goddess. Don't marry her – keep her as your mistress" (173).

Narayan is an idealist who is dejected and deduced that he lived in a culture where even the most powerful men could not sympathize with widows who were living in renunciation and attempting to free themselves from lust in order to exercise much-advocated self-control.

The story 'Water' finishes on a shaky tone of optimism. The narrative, however, is still pertinent as a warning of how blind loyalty to tradition may rule over reason and humanity.

Sidhwa has created a beautiful tale that shows the existence of widow ashrams in Varanasi even now. Their residents may not be as young as Chuiya, but the fact that they exist in the twenty-first century should concern us. Any reader's mind would be adequately upset after reading the story, pitying the agony each widow has endured over decades. One is disturbed to the point of wanting a remedy to the injustice that these vulnerable innocent people were subjected to. From the age of eight to eighty, life for the widows was and is nothing but living in constant torment, restlessly anticipating death. These inhumane practices have been brought under control, thanks to the efforts of socialists like Deepa Mehta and Bapsi Sidhwa, as well as other feminists, educationists, and government intervention. Though their intervention has brought about the change there is indeed a lot that needs to be done in protecting and educating the girl-child and widow remarriage that needs to be promoted.

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