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The Struggle for Identity: A Critical Analysis of Female Suppression in Bapsi Sidhwa's Water

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Abstract

The present research paper aims at the critical study of widowhood, female suppression and their pathetic, miserable life in the Hindu Indian society depicted by Bapsi Sidhwa in the novel "Water". As a committed writer, Bapsi Sidhwa shows how women are traditionally exploited in the name of orthodox customs and rituals in Indian society and realistically depicts women's plight in the hands of men. Mostly she writes the stories of women who have courage to rebel against the so-called unreasonable laws of patriarchal society. In "Water" Sidhwa attempts to examine the social status of widows and confronts a number of issues in Indian society. By narrating the story of Chuhiya, a child-widow and of other widows, she presents the real picture of the then Indian patriarchal society as the story is set in 1936 when the law of widows' remarriage came out and Gandhiji was leading a mass movement for freedom. The novelist deals with the various aspects of patriarchal dominion and women subjugation. She speaks out against the Hindu society for rigid social practices and conventions made for the widows who were treated as merely objects having no emotions. She cleverly explores the various social issues such as child marriage, dowry-system, gender discrimination, women subjugation, child prostitution insensitivity towards the widows etc. As a woman, is much concerned for the status of women in society as in her writing she raises her voice for women empowerment and liberation. Her novels except "The Crow Eaters" present the stories of female protagonists and she deals with the various problems faced by women in society. As a woman, she is conscious of the gender-based role in patriarchal society and her works mirror the true picture of the society where women have to suffer a lot problems due to superstitious, orthodox customs and social practices framed by patriarchy and lead a miserable life. As a realist, Bapsi Sidhwa aptly presents the fact that women are exploited all over the world. With the method of textual analysis, this paper attempts to show the sufferings, conflicts and problems faced by women

specifically widows in Hindu society. Through her novels, she aims to awaken womanhood and presents the idea that women should be courageous and strong willed and try to establish their proper place in society.

Keywords: Widowhood, Patriarchal dominion, Child-marriage, Female suppression, subjugation, & Marginalization of women specially widows, Child-prostitution, Orthodox

1. Introduction

Born in Karachi and grown up in Lahore, Pakistan. Bapsi Sidhwa is the first and the finest English novelist of Pakistan of international repute. She belongs to India, and Pakistan, she is proud of her Zoroastrian faith and constantly shares her various experiences of life in her novels. Though she moved to America with her husband in 1983, she prefers to be called as a "Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsi woman as in an interview to Bachi Karkaria she says:

I'm a Parsi first, then a Pakistani, specifically a Punjabi. I'm woman simply by gender. I don't feel American at all. My consolidated 3 P identity has enriched my writing. (Interview,4)

By her statement it becomes clear that it doesn't matter to which country she belongs, as she is a woman having the same feelings, emotions like any other woman of any other community or country. She is not blind to women sufferings, oppression and their struggle to find their identity in society as her writings portray the misery, oppression and injustice done to women especially widows. As a staunch feminist, she advocates women liberation and upliftment. She feels the need to raise her voice against the subjugation and oppression of women in patriarchal society as she herself revolted against the law. She led a sheltered childhood in a wealthy Pakistani family and was married to a successful businessman at the age of nineteen. She fulfilled her family responsibilities and struggled hard to get her work published and then after the publication of her fiction, she got recognition in the world all over the world and through her women characters, she expresses her own views as she feels the need for the change in society and she realises that women suffer a lot and her pain is quite visible when she says:

Women the world over, through the ages, asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved to get importunately impregnated, beaten up, bullied, and disinherited. It was an immutable law of nature. (TPB,226)

As a realist, she has strong purpose to improve and uplift the condition of women and specifically the widow's plight. Being the critic of society, she highlights the double standard of society where there is one law for men and other for women. As a realist and the true observer of the society she portrays the various aspects of patriarchal society and challenges the orthodox customs and rituals as her aim in writing is to bring a revolution in the society as she says:

As a woman, one is always marginalised, I have worked among woman to create an awareness of their rights and protested against repressive measure aimed at Pakistani women and minority community. (THT)

In fact, her writing reveals her concern for the change in society and shows how her female characters struggle hard to find their identity in patriarchal society. Her aim is to raise the awareness of society towards those traditions that hamper the growth of the individual. As a creative writer she uses her writing as a tool to modulate and reform the society. She aptly presents the truth that not only a man dominates or exploits woman as there are some women who also torture other woman as it is clearly obvious in *Water*, "Ice- Candy Man" and other novels. Sidhwa is one of those creative writers who depict "determined women for whom the traditional role is inadequate, women who wish to affirm their independence and autonomy and are perfectly capable of assuming new roles and responsibilities. (J.J)

2. The Theme of Widowhood in "Water"

"Water" her fifth novel deals with the then miserable condition of the Hindu widows in Indian society in 1938. The novel is based on the story of Chuhiya, a child- widow and other widows around her in an ashram where they were forced to live after the death of their husbands. As a woman, she realises that widows have been exploited and oppressed in patriarchal society. "Water" reveals the pathetic tale of the sufferings and struggles of widows who are regarded as outcast, the symbol of misfortune in Indian society. As a realist, Sidhwa realistically portrays the oppression and injustice done to widows in Hindu society. Being a woman, she is touched to see the inhuman outlook of society towards widows and through her writing, she expresses her own views that widows are also human beings and deserve proper respect and place in society. Widows also have right to take their own decision and to live happily like other women. As a critic of society, she raises her voice against the cruel treatment meted to widows in patriarchal Hindu society. The widows were forced to live a restricted life in ashram, an institution established by the Indian patriarchal society to supply shelter and protection to widows who were forced to live the rest of their lives in penance to achieve salvation. Widows are victimized by the rigid age-old conventions and face many challenges at the ashram due to cruel orthodox social practices and customs. Through the story of Chuhiya, Shakuntala, Kalyani and other widows she presents how widows are victimized and marginalised in society.

As a critic of society, she takes liberty to ask some bold questions:

- Is a widow not a human being?
- Has she no feelings, emotions like other women? Why are widows treated as objects?
- Why is she not allowed to express her longings and emotions?
- How can the very presence of widows bring contamination and bad luck?

Why is a widow considered a threat to society?

Like Mulkraj Anand, Bapsi Sidhwa is a writer with a purpose to make people aware of the need of change in their outlook towards women especially widows. With a great reformatory aim, she presents the fact that women have been treated unequally by men for years. They have been victims to the so- called traditional patriarchal society. Patriarchal Indian system compels a woman to live a subordinate life as patriarchal norms deny a woman to think and act properly. Sidhwa believes in feminine power and opposes the age-old restrictions and gender

discrimination. As a minute observer of society, she realises that women are raped, beaten, exploited due to false ego of men who use women as puppets in their hands as "within the patriarchal system, which has prevailed over most of recorded history, there is rape, wife battering, incest, and other structural forms of violence designed to maintain men's dominion over women."(Mercanti,165).

As a woman, Bapsi Sidhwa has firm faith in female strength as her female characters such as Shakuntala, Chuhiya, Kalyani in "Water", Zaitoon in "The Pakistani Bride" Ayah in "Ice Candy Man" are the bold, courageous women fighting and struggling hard for their existence. Though they are tortured, and exploited by the cruel ruthless patriarchal practices, they show remarkable strength to fight for their freedom and show the indomitable strength and fortitude to save their life from the ruthless clutches of patriarchal society. Through the portrayal of her strong female characters, Sidhwa exhorts women to be strong, courageous, fearless and bold so that they may struggle against patriarchal norms and find their proper place in society. Zaitoon is an inspiration to other women as she believes in her own strength and takes risk to save her life from the ruthless hands of her husband. Bapsi Sidhwa is much inspired by the Urdu poetry of Ghalib and Iqbal as she cited in "The Pakistani Bride":

Kudi ko kar buland itna,

Ke har taqdeer se pahalay,

Khuda bandey say khud poochay, Bata teri raza kya hai?(TPB229)

The word "Khudi" means willpower, the mental and spiritual strength of mind, the strength of nature, a force, perhaps of God, within one.

In "Water" Shakuntala also feels a spiritual strength within herself and ponders over the very existence of widows as she has the mental strength, the triumph of mind and realizes her goal and saves Chuhiya, the child widow from the hostile atmosphere of ashram. Sidhwa is influenced by Gandhian Philosophy as her novels deal with the contemporary social, realistic issues. Her women characters are not rebels by nature but they suffer and undergo various problems by patriarchal society. So they are forced to struggle hard to save their existence and ultimately, they become victorious as they have the spiritual strength to overcome every cruel situation and show the fortitude to change their destiny by their powerful efforts as Makarand R. Paranjape remarks: God is compelled to seek human consent by such strength of spirit. After all, those who are weak, dispossessed, powerless, and suppressed, what other strength do they have to struggle, to fight, not to give in against overwhelming odds, even to win except the will, the spirit, the resolve to fight? (TNBS,105)

Sidhwa reveals how the widows were forced to live in an ashram after the death of their husbands and realistically presents the difficulties of the widowhood as widows have to face many challenges in ashram.

3. Child Marriage and Patriarchal Exploitation

Chuhiya is only six years old and her father Somnath, an orthodox priest decides her marriage with Hira Lal, an elderly person of 44. When her mother Bhagya opposes this irrational match by saying that Chuhiya is too young and Hira Lal is an older man and the latter will not be able to satisfy her as he will be old and spent by her Somnath reprimands Bhagya for the carnal longings and says:

"The Brahmin elders were right, women are dangerous. They sapped a man's strength and stood between him and salvation. (W,8)

Here Sidhwa satirises the patriarchal masculine dominion as Somnath is not ready to listen to his wife Bhagya and ignores her by saying that Hiralal belongs to a rich and resourceful family and doesn't want dowry. Somnath says:

They don't want a dowry; they will pay for the wedding. (W,13)

On the one hand, Sidhwa presents the fact that the parents only think of the riches of their sons-in-law and ignore the age differences in marriage. They don't think whether the son -in -law is sick or aged. The parents think daughter as a burden due to the dowry practices so Bhagya is bound to follow her husband as the latter convinces her by saying that the relationship with a rich family will be a great honour for them and it will also be helpful for Somanath 'services and thus this marriage will be good for her son's future too. So Chuhiya ' s marriage with Hira Lal is a kind of business. They have no concern for the poor child of six and think of only riches. Sidhwa says:

Bhagya thought of her sons and wondered, would she be able to give them the quantity of milk and fat and fish that had nourished HiraLal ' trim body? And even she mutely appeals to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, to bless her household, her misgivings concerning her daughter's betrothed quiet. The goddess had favoured her, but she had been too thick-headed to recognize it; it was plain to see that the connection with Hira Lal's family would benefit her household. (W, 27)

On the other hand, Sidhwa suggests that parents don't treat children equally as sons are always preferred to girls and a girl child has to suffer discrimination in family as it is considered that her lot is to marry and have children and so there is no need to send a her to school as it is just a waste of time and money. Instead of study, she has to learn household works and this fact is constantly presented by the novelist in her novels as in the novel "Ice-Candy Man" Lenny's"parents are worried for her studies, Col.Barucha consoled her mother by saying that Lenny will lead a happy life:

She' ll marry, have children - lead a carefree happy life. No need to strain her with studies and exams. (ICM,15)

As a true observer of the society Sidhwa explores the fact that marriage is regarded the destiny of a girl whether she belongs to Pakistani, Parsi or Indian society, her lot is to get married as this thought is constantly presented by the writer in her novels as in "The Pakistani Bride" Miriam is of the opinion that There is no need to send Zaitoon school for study as she should

learn homely tasks and management of home as she is to get married, similarly in "Water" it is shown that a girl is destined to marry and leave her parents' home otherwise she will be disgrace to the family. According the Brahmanical tradition it is regarded that a girl is happy and prosperous only in the house of her husband as Somnath remarks:

"In Brahmanical tradition.....a woman is recognised as a person only when she is one with her husband. Only then does she become a sumangli, an auspicious woman, and, a saubhagyavati, a fortunate woman.....

A woman's body is a site for conflict between a demonic stri-svavahave, which is her lustful aspect, and her stri- dharma, which is her womanly duty. (W,14)

Chuhiya, a girl child is married to an elderly man and becomes widow at the age of eight and is compelled to live a life of recluse in a widow's ashram after the death of her husband. Sidhwa highlights the miserable condition of widows in ashram where widows were forced to live in penitence till their death. It is regarded that widows are inauspicious and widowhood is the punishment for a sinful existence in the past. Sidhwa reveals that Chuhiya is blamed by her mother in-law for her karmic debt of past sins. She blamed that Chuhiya has become a widow due to her past karmas and so as a punishment she is deprived of married bliss. As a realist, Sidhwa depicts how even a little child could not be saved from the inhuman treatment meted out to the widow Chuhiya's life is totally changed due to her husband's death as she couldn't understand what was happening with her. Her whole life is changed as she becomes wife and widow only in the very short period of four years. Sidhwa highlights how the poor innocent child becomes the victim to the cruel rigid customs of the patriarchy and suffers without her own fault. From a child she turns into a grieving widow. The innocent child who is too young to understand the meaning of marriage, widowhood, traditional and social limitations, is forced to widowhood. To her marriage was just a matter of new dresses, jewellery and delicacies but now her condition is changed and leaving all jewellery and new dresses she is forced to live a life of penance as the remarriage of a widow was not allowed at that time.

According to Manusmriti, the foremost Sanskrit text in the orthodox traditions:

A widow's head is shaved, her ornaments removed and she is to observe fast, give up eating hot foods in order to cool her sexual energy, avoid auspicious occasions, because she is considered inauspicious. (W,97)

In the novel, Sidhwa questions the inhuman, brutal treatment meted out to widows as they were regarded the inanimate objects, without feelings and emotions. It is regarded that a woman is half dead after the death of her husband. Even Madhumati, one of the widows says...it is written over there in Shastras that woman is the second half of the man when he is alive and after his death, the wife' is also half dead, so how can a widow suffer. Sidhwa realistically portrays how a widow is exploited and marginalized in patriarchal society. Chuhiya's head is shaved as in this way she is deprived of femineity and sexuality and her shaven head is the trademark of her ill fate. All tokens of marriage like vermilion, bangles, Mangal sutra are removed from her body. Her clothes and jewellery were taken off and she is expected to live a saintly life wearing

a white saree in ashram. "With her white sari bald, yellow head, Chuhiya was a very different child from the girl who had ridden in the bullock cart". (W.44)

As Chuhiya enters the ashram, she is horrified to see the new and strange surroundings and requests her father to take her to home but Somnath is sad and helpless as he has to follow the traditional customs of society. And he is helpless to abandon Chuhiya to her. Sidhwa depicts the poor miserable life of widows in the ashram as widows had to beg for their one meal of the day and sing religious songs outside the temple. They earned a few coins and some rice otherwise they would starve. If a widow was too sick to beg, she had to starve. They have only task to pray, observe fasts and to suppress their desires. Chuhiya is not used to beg and feels much humiliated when in the temple a girl of her age gives her a coin as alms. She is rebellious by nature as being a child she can not understand why she is denied to eat good food and enjoy like other girls. But she controls her anger and buys a hot, little laddu for Bua, an old widow in the ashram. Here Sidhwa shows how widows have to suffer and yearn for the petty things like laddu in ashram as Bua has the longing to eat the laddu and keeps on remembering her happy past life before the death of her husband. She keeps on reminiscing about her wedding day and longs for the laddu as she says: awake or sleep, even in all dreams, all I see are sweets.(46) And Bua is awakened by the rich aroma emitted by the Laddu and dies soon after eating it . It seems as she got heaven by eating the sweet as Shakuntala consoles Chuhiya and says " After eating the laddu, she will go to heaven. "(117)

4. Social Hypocrisy and the Commodification of Widows

Through Kalyani, a young beautiful widow in the ashram, Sidhwa questions the hypocrisy of traditional upper-class people who twist the holy texts for their selfish ends as some widows are gradually led to prostitution for the gratification of upper class. She presents the cruel reality by showing how the widows are exploited by upper caste male and the so-called priests. Kalyani, a young widow of nineteen is forced to become a prostitute by Madhumati, the head of the ashram, who needs money. Kalyani is allowed to have hair as she helps Madhumati to run the ashram and provides money. Madhumati suggests Kalyani to take care of her beauty as her beautiful look will help her to allure her clients. She calls Kalyani a diamond of the ashram and says, "If you are happy, our clients are happy. And when they are happy, I am happy"(152) Though Kalyani protests her by saying that "this is an ashram Didi, not a brothel"(152), she is helpless and bound to obey Madhumati. Sidhwa highlights the double standard of ashram where a widow is given extra care while other widows are forbidden to have hair or look beautiful and forced to live a saintly life. She also questions the double standard of the society that doesn't allow a widow to remarry as her remarriage will condemn her husband's soul to heaven and curse the karmas of his family but on the other hand, a widow is forced to gratify upper-class people. Kalyani is loved by Narayan who is influenced by Gandhism and does not believe in caste system. As a revolutionary, he opposes the orthodox traditions and rigid patriarchal system that does not allow the remarriage of the widow. He loves Kalyani and wants to marry her. Kalyani feels great mental conflict as she wants to get rid of the forced prostitution in ashram. She believes in Narayan and longs to live a free, happy life with him but Alas! She is denied. On the other hand, when Madhumati comes to know about Kalyani's idea of

marriage, she becomes angry and imprisons her and says..."Who will marry a widow? It's a sin. We are leading the life of penance." Through Kalyani, the novelist questions the hypocritical society the ashram and Sidhwa realistically portrays that Madhumati is against Kalyani's marriage because if the latter marries, who will provide her money for her addictions and easy life in ashram as Kalyani earns more than any other widow in the ashram. Chuhiya loves Kalyani and wants to help her. As a child, she is unable to understand why Madhumati is against her marriage. Sidhwa presents her thoughts:

Who was Madhumati to deny her friend her marriage, her chance at happiness?.....If kalyani could escape her circumstances and remarry, then Chuhiya might some day manage to do so and also break from the ashram. (W, 167)

Here Sidhwa exposes the hypocrisy of society where widows are treated as sex objects and are raped, and assaulted sexually. Though widows are regarded outcast and unlucky, the upper-class people don't hesitate to sleep with them secretly as Kalyani is sent to Seth Dwarka Nath who doesn't hesitate to sleep with her but on the other hand, he is against his son's idea of marriage with a widow and suggests the latter to keep Kalyani as a concubine. Though people don't talk of sexuality openly, they have eyes upon the vital womanhood and potential sexual bodily charms of widows. Sidhwa questions _ is it their (widows) fault that they have women bodies? Why are men not accused of having sexual relations with widows? How can the upper class people be pure after sleeping with widows, the impure women? Why are only widows treated as threat to society? How can a woman 's sexuality and fertility convert into a great danger to the morality of the society? Sidhwa satirises child marriages and social discouragement of remarriage of young widows and presents the bitter truth how widows are discriminated as there are no restrictions for the widowers and they can remarry and live happily. She satirises the patriarchal society when Chuhiya asks: Where is the widower house of men? And asks why only men are allowed to live a happy normal life after the death of their wives? If a widow has no right to live as an individual? Why are widows not treated as human beings? Why can't she live happily after the death of her husband? Why they are shunned and abandoned in the ashram? why they are compelled to suffer the difficulties of widowhood? Is it her fault if her husband dies?

5. Spiritual Awakening and Resistance

Through Shakuntala, Sidhwa presents a strong character who feels a spiritual strength within herself and ponders over the existence of widows as she tries to interpret the worth of life of widows. She asks Pandit Sadananda:

Pandit ji, is it written that widows should be maltreated. (W,157)

As a woman, she has seen the sufferings of widows and herself is the victim of the cruel and orthodox customs of patriarchal society. She was illtreated by her in-laws and her life after the death of her husband became hell. Her inner sorrow is quite obvious when she prays for Bua after her death. God willing, she will be reborn as a man(W,117) She feels sympathy for Chuhiya and kalyani and helps them. Through her Sidhwa presents a courageous woman who

has indomitable spirit and courage. She is happy for Kalyani as she is going to remarry and supports her. She comes to know about the new law of widows remarriage by Sadananda, she is clever enough to understand the selfishness of Madhumati as the latter deliberately concealed the news from everyone in the ashram by saying: We must live in purity to die in purity.(144) Her courage is quite seen when she rushes to the room of Madhumati and snatches key from her in great agitation and gets Kalyani free to marry Narayan. Unfortunately, marriage cannot take place. Again, her indomitable spirit is visible in saving Chuhiya from the clutches of Madhumati and the cruel atmosphere of the ashram. She protects Chuhiya otherwise the poor girl will also be forced to live the life a prostitute. To Chuhiya, Shakuntala is her Durga as Chuhiya declares twice in the novel:

You are my Durga (W, 90).

As a ferocious lioness, Shakuntala with bruised Chuhiya in her lap and inner turmoil joins a mob that takes her to railway station to meet Gandhi ji. After hearing Gandhi's speech, women feel a kind of awakening in themselves. Shakuntala realized her goal and the last sentence hums in her head: "Truth is God". She entrusts Chuhiya to Narayan on the departing train so that the poor girl may live a free and happy life anywhere away from the ashram.

6. Conclusion

Thus, it is quite clear that Sidhwa is a true feminist who observes the various aspects of patriarchal society minutely and through her works, she focuses on the women's problems and raises her voice to make society aware of various problems suffered by women and widows. As a social reformer, she intends to bring a kind of revolution in the society as her women characters fight and raise their voice against injustice, exploitation and marginalization of women. Her female characters are bold, courageous and rebelliously take stand to save their existence. Her characters like Chuhiya, Shakuntala, Kalyani, Zaitoon assert themselves and try to break the confinement of patriarchal society and aim to search for their identity. Her aim in writing is to awaken her readers towards various social issues that hamper the progress of women in society. As a woman, she has successfully depicted how women and especially widows are discriminated and denied to the basic rights in patriarchal society. Though time has changed now, there is still the need of reform. Being a true writer, she has touched the pulse of the society and has diagnosed the problem of the contemporary society. By highlighting the social restrictions and limitations for widows, she demands for equal status for them as she believes that widows also have their own individuality and should be allowed to live happily and remarry like widowers. Though time has changed, the condition of widows has not yet improved due to some rigid patriarchal norms. Though some efforts are made for the betterment of their condition in society, they are not enough as there is a great need of some reformative steps for their better and respectable status in the society. By portraying the strong female characters, she aptly presents the picture of new women who are not ready to surrender to the age-old rigid conventions and break the shackles of social taboos. Thus she is a novelist of purpose, a powerful vision as her writings reveal her reaction against the exploitation of women. Her novels are truly social-realistic and reveal her voice of reform and protest.

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