



## A FEMINIST READING OF BAPSI SIDHAWA'S NOVEL WATER

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### ABSTRACT

*Feminist literature always deals with the psychological, emotional and physical problems faced by women around the world. Women took writing as a medium to show their real image in a society wherein they are more or less marginalized in terms of gender and sex. Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the widely known Pakistani-American novelist, writing from a post-colonial consciousness. The images of the changing India, politically and socially cost a deep impact on Sidhwa's mind. The novel, Water is about the unprojected sufferings of women in India and child marriage before the independence. Through three women characters namely Chuiya, Kalyani and Shakunthala, the novelist portrays the subjugation of women in pre independence era. In this novel, we can know about Gandhi's participation to make women to come out of home to get equality. This paper highlights how marriage becomes a turning point in the life of Chuiya, the torture she undergoes at the window's ashram and the ideological conflicts of our Indian society.*

**Keywords:** Marriage, Widow, Ashram, Punishment, Freedom.

### INTRODUCTION

The term feminism stands for a demand to have equal opportunities for women in every field. Thus a feminist would come as a one who might advocate or voice for such rights and equality of women. Considering feminist theory, it can be seen that it hopes to comprehend the very nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and life experiences. This seems to have branched out and has developed theories that ranges in a spectrum of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as social hierarchy of sex and gender.

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Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water* projects the untold sufferings of widows in Indian society. This novel is set in 1938.. This novel describes how Hindu widows were treated in traditional Indian society. This novel also depicts injustice towards women that is not to a particular sector, caste and society but is universal. The widows in ancient India was extremely discriminated and inhumanly treated by the society. Historically, traditions like 'widow – burning or sati' characterized the norms of Hindu society for widows. Practices such as sati were abolished during the British rule. In 1856, the British legalized widow remarriage in India. A century and a half has passed away since then Indian Independence has happened. Economic liberalization and globalization have transformed our basic cultural system. Yet, widows still lead a miserable and pitiable life in many towns of India. They face a variety of social taboos every day and practice austerity and self- denial. In some places, young widows are often sexually exploited. Elderly widows are left to beg outside the temples or busy streets.

Customs and traditions are often invoked to marginalize and isolate widows in the society . Being labeled as 'inauspicious' widows are often isolated. Sidhwa took an important issue that is the condition of widows during 1930s and Gandhi's influence on the society. This novel also includes women's participation in freedom struggle. This struggle was an unprecedented huge scale. Gandhi turned traditional symbols and ideas into sources of inspiration and energy for women. It was under the influence of Gandhi that women became aware of their right. Though the nationalist struggle provided women with an opportunity to enter the public sphere , it could not totally transform the reality. In *Water*, the serious challenge to the androcratic traditions is posed by the indomitable spirit of Chuiya who refuses to be enslaved by the oppressive limitations of the monolithic patriarchal system. Animated by her inquisitive innocence and too young to succumb to the gender norms imposed by the society, she persistently asks Shakunthala why there are no male widowers and why only women have to spend their lives in renunciation.

In the beginning of the novel, Chuiya is considered to be a burden towards her father Somnath. She is not considered an equal to her brothers Mohan and Prasad. As Dhavan writes, " A girl is destined to leave her parents home early " (14).This novel describes the life of Chuiya, her childhood, her marriage and her widowhood. The whole novel revolves around the miseries of widowhood. Chuiya is a six years old girl . she is very poor. Her father Somnath decides to marry her to Hiralal, who was a widower and much older to her. Chuiya's mother Bhagya was not happy with the decision of Somanth regarding their daughter .Somnath said, "She is only six, Bhagya said, her voice so low that Somnath had to strain to catch her words. I've heard Hiralal is a grandfather' he is younger than me, about forty-four"(Water, 7)

However, Somanth has given his words to HiraLal's mother. He can not take his words back. Child marriage in India is a common practice during the Pre Independence period. Through there are many reasons for child marriage, the main reason would be poverty and cultural beliefs. Sidhwa has given a detailed description of Chuiya's marriage in the novel. Chuiya enjoys celebrations during the numerous wedding rituals. She innocently enjoys the enticing offer of new clothes and the



celebrations related with marriage .Many presents are offered to Chuiya. These include saris ,a gold mangal suthra and a lot of jewellery. Chuiya shakes her arms to show off the jingling bangles to envious friends . A lot of make up is applied on her face. Chuiya declined, “I don’t want to turn yellow, she cried trying to wiggle out of her aunt’s grasp. My friends will laugh at me. Wash it off. You won’t turn yellow. You’ll turn golden, and your husband will be dazzled by your beauty” (Water 18) The wedding takes place in a temple. These descriptions make us feel for the little girl Chuiya who innocently enjoys the rituals without knowing the consequences in the near future.

Sidhwa’s novel *Water* explores the various aspects of men’s authority and the women’s subjugation. There are various ways by which the men marginalize women and sexuality is one of them. Although all women are subordinate to men without any distinction of married ones and the widows but the widows plight are most pitiful. Sidhwa exposes the erratic social set up which allows the exploitation of a child widow. After Harilal’s death, Chuiya’s father forced his daughter to a widow’s ashram. Somanath politely tells her daughter about the death of her husband. Chuiya accepts the truth without reacting to the situation. Crane notifies that, “the death of the husband brings a turning point in the life of a Hindu women. She supposed to wear a white dress. The purpose of this attire is to make her unattractive to others”(26). It is still being practiced by Hindu widows of all ages in rural as well as in urban places. Chuiya is left in the ashram. She found herself in strange surrounding. Madhumathi is the head of the ashram. Life in this ashram was very poor, disease prone and miserable. The condition of the widow is dreary as they are the soft targets of men of the upper caste and priests. Every widow in the ashram has a story behind her presence in that place. Shakunthala is present there not only for the death of her beloved husband but also her inability to conceive that resulted in her unfortunate fate. After the death of her husband, she was subjected to ill-treatment at the hands of her-in-laws. The one year she stayed at her in-laws place was a perpetual hell.

In this novel, *Water*, Sidhwa discusses the influence of Gandhi on society. Sidhwa presents in the novel that a man came out in the street, shouting, “The British have let Gandhiji out of jail! He is free!” (Water 184). This particular person throws pamphlets here and there. Gandhi’s name is echoing throughout the streets. Gandhi was the centre of discussion. Sidhwa describes beautifully the influence of Gandhi in the following lines, “Gandhiji is here...At the Railway station...On his way from Allahabad...Mahatma Gandhi is here...”(Water,194) Gandhi talks about the concept of truth and non-violence. The novelist explores Gandhi’s opinion about Truth. Gandhi has profound faith in truth. According to him, truth works in the long run and the nation motto is truth shall prevail. All of a sudden, it was under the influence of Gandhi that Shakunthala became aware of her real motive in life. The widows ironic situation is stated by Novy in the following lines:

*“What a disaster! If one widow wants to marry, all the widows will want to marry. A calamity... Do you know what he says? Who? Madhumathi responded half-heartedly ‘Gandhi, he says widows are strangers to love. And nobody should be strange to love’” (54)*

When Madhumathi forced Chuiya in the prostitution to maintain her steady income. Shakunthala tried hard to save Chuiya from the dirty business. Thus, this novel reflects the social, political and cultural



changes in the society. This novel can be helpful to us to understand women's place in Pre-Independence India. The widows are not only ill-omened rather they are taken as objects of sex. The gentry finds it so easy to involve widows in prostitution as they know that the poor widows have no other chance than this to earn money. The men take advantage of their weak position and use them to satisfy their sexual desire. One of these widows is Kalyani who enters into prostitution by Madhumathi. Madhumathi is supported financially by the prostitution of Kalyani to run the ashram. When Madhumathi knows about Kalyani's intention of marriage, she imprisons her, cuts her hair and tortured her with the help of Shankunthala, she accompanies Narayan to his town in the hope of free life with all its charms but when she sees the mansion of his father, she learns that his father has been client to her. Shattered and dejected Kalyani comes back and drowns herself in the Ganga River. After Kalyani, Madhumathi needs a young widow to work as prostitute for her. She chooses Chuiya and by the false promise sends her to a client. The client raped Chuiya.. The girl, Chuiya is so brutalized that she takes a couple of days to see with all her senses. At the end, Shakanthala sends her in the train of Gandhi's followers to explore a new life for her.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

Thus, this paper depicts the untold sufferings of female characters in pre-Independence India in the novel, *Water*. This novel narrates the darkest side of child marriage and early widowhood of women. The innocent girl, Chuiya makes every readers fill their heart with deep sorrow. Childhood is a blessing to everyone. But the parents make it a curse to the girl child by arranging marriage to her even before her puberty. The parents and the social practices of our society are the victim to destroy the happiness of the girl child. The poor girls do not have courage to oppose their parents. So they passively submit themselves to the fate without questioning. The male took advantage over this situation and exploit the kid without heart. This paper can be concluded that the novel water depicts the position of the women particularly of the widows in the subcontinent in 1930s. The society is completely a patriarchal society and the men possess all the powers and women are compelled to live a subordinate life. Hence it is obvious that female subjugation plays a vital role in this novel.

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