

# Bapsi Sidhwa's Water: Pangs of Widowhood

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**Abstract**— *Feminist writings were of crucial interest to the post-colonial discourse for the reasons first both patriarchy and imperialism could be seen to exert different forms of domination over those subordinates to them. So it was important for the experiences of women under the patriarchal influence to come out to the forefront and expose the under cruelty be held on them by men. We observe that women continued to define the borders of the community, class, and race. They tried to exert feminism through their works. These women writers have given us an honest picture of women in family, social relationships, and traditions. Bapsi Sidhwa has made a genuine contribution to feminist literature. Her novels are an amalgam of confliction and convictions, sensibilities and dignity that belong to the historical, political, socio-cultural arena of the Indian Subcontinent. Sidhwa's novel 'water' brings to the light the age-old customs that victimise women. The subject of the novel is controversial and complex. It is about the plight of widows in 1930s India. It is with this spirit the present research paper has been prepared. As a scriptwriter of 'water'. Bapsi Sidhwa exposes the inherent indifference, fatalism, and violence latent in orthodox Hinduism.*

**Keywords**— *cruelty, Domination, Patriarchy, tradition, widow.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Feminism, as an extension of existentialism, finds an echo in world literature. This existential struggle to establish one's own identity, to assert one's individuality and the desperate fight to exist as a separate entity appears in all its intensity in the novels of women writers of the Indian subcontinent, like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Rama Mehta, Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni, Nayantara Sahgal, Taslima Nasreen and Bapsi Sidhwa. They are predictable for their originality, versatility, and the indigenous flavour of the soil that they bring to their work. These women writers have given us an honest picture of the place of women in family, society, relationships, and traditions.

Bapsi Sidhwa, the Pakistani-Parsi-Punjabi novelist presently settled in Houston, USA, has been hailed as Pakistan's most excellent English language novelist and has won several prestigious literary awards the world over. The novels of Sidhwa are an amalgam of conflicts and convictions, sensibilities and dignity that belong to the historical, political, socio-cultural arena of the Indian subcontinent.

Bapsi Sidhwa has made a genuine contribution to feminist literature. Though an active social worker for the upliftment and emancipation of women, Sidhwa's novels are not banners aggrandizing the cause. All her novels are satires on society's behaviour towards women. However,

stark truths, naked reality tempered with subtle irony and gentle humour succeed in presenting the sordid picture that stings. In her novels, the approach to feminism is indirect, suggestive, and therefore more compelling. In an interview with Gaurav Sood, Sidhwa speaks about the contribution of women writers in highlighting the gender inequalities:

"... 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."<sup>2</sup>

## II. BAPSI SIDHWA AND HER REBELS IN 'WATER'

'Water', the fifth novel of Bapsy Sidhwa has been filmed by Deepa Mehta, an Indo Canadian filmmaker, evoking strong reactions. It constitutes the third part of her trilogy about sexuality, nationalism, and religion on the subcontinent. The novel, located in 1938, nine years before India freed itself from the shackles of colonialism, is based on the treatment of Hindu Widows in traditional society. Unlike her earlier novels, 'Water' does not have any Parsi, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian characters, but focuses on Hindu characters. This novel completes the circle, encompassing all communities, in depicting that injustice towards women

that is not limited to a sect, caste or society but is universal. After Zaitoon, Carol and Ayah, the Hindu widows of India that are highlighted as hapless slaves to ancient traditions and superstitions.

The sombre and austere atmosphere of a religious society that 'Water' conjures up raises several bold questions about a patriarchal society. The discomfort aroused is quite unsettling as the protagonist of the story is a six-year-old girl – Chuhiya, the playful daughter of a poor Brahmin priest, Somnath married to the 44-year-old Hiralal, reminiscent of Afshaan in "The Pakistani Bride" handed over to Yunus Khan for settling an old loan. The care-free little girl playing in the lap of nature whole day scampering about her mother like her namesake reaches a place where "she was surrounded by dead, hounded by death, by the constant stench of funeral pyres."(114)

But at least Afshaan was of marriageable age whereas Chuhiya is a child for whom marriage is nothing more than an enticing offer of new clothes, delicacies, and an enviable opportunity to be the centre of attention. And even before marriage could register its meaning on her delicate senses, Chuhiya is told that she has ceased to exist for her loved ones, as her husband has died. She is shunned and transferred to a remote secluded ashram meant for widows, miles away from her family, especially from 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 Chuhiya 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

Life in these old ashrams is wretched, disease-prone and miserable. The only task of the widows is to pray, observe fasts, and suppress their desires. Their heads are shorn as a trademark of their ill-fate as well as to deprive them of their womanly charms and to prevent the husband's soul from burning in hell. The condition of the widow is dreary as they become soft targets for men of the upper-caste and priests. They are devoid of any possible pleasure even if it meant severance from old ties and the ritual is so deep-seated that the sight of these women is regarded as ominous to other women, particularity to a bride. Gradually, they are led to prostitution for the gratification of putrid intentions of upper-castes who claim that their touch would bless the souls of the widows. They undergo all these humiliations as repentance for their sins

which they believe they have committed in their previous births and patiently await their end to join their husbands. Some day they die old, wretched and unmourned! Sidhwa writes:

"They had grown as accustomed to begging as they had to the gruelling hours of singing in temple halls to earn a few coins and a fistful of rice. Without these handouts, they would starve."(96)

Sidhwa weaves a brilliant story encompassing almost all the aspects of wretched widowhood and unjust treatment meted out to aggrieved women in the novel 'Water'. Each character be it Chuhiya, Kalyani, Shakuntala, Patirajji (Bua) even Madhumati face the serve inhuman punishment of society in different facets. One of Sidhwa's great strengths is to make a point without underlining it. She brilliantly portrays each minute detail of the miserable conditions of widows in ashram living in complete negation of life.

The novel begins with preliminary scenes of Chuhiya's daily routine before marriage and her frivolous way of life. The preliminary scenes act as a prologue to Chuhiya's impending doom. Although the novel revolves around the miseries of widowhood, Chuhiya's single stage of life shows the concern and burden of parents having a daughter at their disposal:

"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)

Sidhwa's omnipresent discomfort at women's plight in Indian society is well-projected in Bhagya's sensibilities, even though she scrupulously believes the rules laid down by her society and faith. Aghast at Somnath's decision of marrying Chuhiya to Hira Lal, the docile Bhagya is outraged. Her daughter is still too young, and the idea of her early absence from the house is unacceptable to her. Somnath reminds her role of women in the Brahmanical 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)

Nevertheless, Bhagya cannot relish the idea of an older man marrying her yet-to-bloom daughter. Brazenly she confronts her husband:

"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)

The blatant reference to the daughter's carnal yearnings is too much for an orthodox puritanical father and priest. In an instant, he is reminded of ancestral advice. Sidhwa gives us a peep into his ruminations:

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

The irony and satire are apparent in Sidhwa's words. Reprimanding Bhagya, he says:

"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 overwhelmed at her husband's rebuke, apologizes, and gives her consent to his wish. She realizes that a girl "carried within her the seeds of dishonour"(9). Society had moulded motherhood to fit into the system. Sons were of great value, and Bhagya reserved extra portions of food for her sons and still worried about their health, whereas Chuhiya's little body was piled with domestic burdens. Bhagya's heart, though not accustomed to showering love and affection on her daughter, brims over with love for Chuhiya as she watches her sleep. She wonders, being a mother, how could she be partial to her sons, lavishing all her attention to them knowing it well that Chuhiya was a replica of her childhood. Was it because she knows it quite well that the daughter is a guest in the parental household and belongs to the husband? In a surge of love, she kisses her beautiful daughter's forehead:

"Flesh of my flesh, the beautiful fruit of my womb: her gaze lingered on her daughter's face"(10)

Thus, the rigid convention and age-old beliefs could not withhold the emotions blooming in a mother's heart as Bhagya snapped her fingers to ward-off the evil eye from her little child. However, the evil eye did have a catastrophic effect on Chuhiya's fate. Sidhwa's matter-of-fact style in describing Chuhiya's treatment as she embraced widowhood is devastating:

... As the razor scraped across her scalp, Chuhiya's teeth were set on edge. Somnath noticed her toes curl, almost reflexively, in mute protest."(33-35)

But Chuhiya, like other Sidhwa's protagonists, bore within her the seeds of protest. This is depicted when Madhumati trying to placate Chuhiya in her trauma says that a woman is half-dead with her dead husband so how can she feel pain, instantly Chuhiya replies:

Because she's half alive?'

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'I don't want to be a stupid widow! Fatty!'(42)

Unable to grasp the situation, Chuhiya undergoes something which she probably couldn't witness in her worst possible nightmares. Leaving the parents to be among semi-starved ghost-like apparitions in a rickety building in the heart of an unknown city annoys Chuhiya and she is positive that this new ordeal is tentative and eventually she would reunite with her loved ones. However, later in the novel, when Shakuntala tells her she cannot go home, her simple resigned answer "I know"(116) tears us apart and fills us with spite for a cruel and uncompromising adult world that could not spare a little child. Sidhwa points out: "With her white sari and bald, yellow head, Chuhiya was a very different child from the girl who had ridden in the bullock cart."(44)

The blank walls of widow ashram become her macroscopic world and its inmates her family. Chechnya learnt that she lived in a singing ashram and if a widow was too sick to sing in temples, she starved that day. Chuhiya's relationship with each one of them is different, and her presence acts as a catalyst in their lives. She played hopscotch with embittered Kunti, listened to stories from Bua, kneaded Madhumati's aching legs, gave companionship to Kalyani, played hide-and-seek with other widows and nuzzled up to Shakuntala arousing warm feeling in her.

Shakuntala is one of the most powerful characters in the novel. It is Shakuntala who fights her doubts, discovers the truth, and sets the widow-prostitute Kalyani free from the confines to unite with her lover, and it is Shakuntala itself that emerges victorious in saving Chuhiya's life from routine prostitution and redeems life back to her. She is one of those heroes who travel from innocence to experience. Believing staunchly in her faith, she ultimately discovers that God is not Truth, but Truth is God. We can say, she is the only round character in the novel whereas Kalyani and Chuhiya are the victims of oppression.

Since her first mention in the novel, we get an impression that Shakuntala is someone different. Scrupulously devoted to her faith and duties, with stern authority, rare gravity, doctored aloofness, and genuine concern for the ones deserving it, she evokes an aura of purity and magnificence that belongs to a goddess. Twice in the novel, Chuhiya declares "You are my Durga"(90), and indeed it is correct as it is this woman of substance whom Sidhwa chose to materialize Chuhiya's freedom. Her conscience a battleground of dogmas laid down by ancient wisdom and her won logic, she emerges victorious in discovering the ultimate Truth. "I am no goddess"(44) she retaliates to Chuhiya as hers is a conscience enquiring about what is the

true meaning of life: "There must be a reason for it. Why are we sent here?"(181)

Obedient Shakuntala blindly followed the scriptures saying that widowhood was a punishment for sinful karmas in the past and she laboriously prayed in repentance all the time. The fact that she could read and write all sacred texts brought her solace and minimized the pain of the memories of loved ones. However, a string of events happening around her in the lives of widows gradually disintegrates her firm adherence to old beliefs. Shakuntala ponders over lives of Bua, Kalyani and ultimately her own trying to decipher the rationality and worth behind such an existence. Is it what the gods and goddess intend? She enquires from the priest Sadananda: "Pandit – Ji, is it written that widows should be maltreated?"(157)

Besides her omnipresence, it is through Shakuntala's perspective, her spirit of enquiry, penetrating observations, and responsiveness to the situations that Sidhwa can depict the lives of widows. Unlike Chuhiya, Madhu Mati and Kalyani, Shakuntala did not come to the ashram as a young girl in dissipation. Each widow like Chaucer's pilgrims have a sad tale behind their presence in the death of her beloved husband but also because of her inability to conceive that resulted in her present ill – fate. After the death of her husband, the mother-in-law's spite surfaced itself as Shakuntala was subjected to ill-treatment at the hands of her – in-laws. The one year she stayed at her in-law's place was a perpetual hell.

"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)

How insane it is to punish an innocent woman "simply because of her vial womanhood and potential sexuality" as it poses a threat to the purity of male – members of the family. Is there no one to question the faith, self – control and fidelity of these men? Is it Shakuntala's fault that she possesses a woman's body? Unsurprisingly she prays for Bua after her death: "God willing, she will be reborn as a man!"(117)

Chechnya and old Bua together formed a complete circle of life, illustrating women oppression irrespective of their age. At Bua's death, it is through Shakuntala's perspective that we are made to realize the inhuman treatment meted out towards Bua and the resultant awakenings in Shakuntala's subconsciousness. In the ashram where there were insufficient morsels of food to

kill the pangs of hunger, the memories of tables laid out with colourful and vibrant delicacies tickled Bua's taste buds. Craving for food, old Bua never let an opportunity pass without describing the minute details of the exuberant display of laddoos and gulab – jamun at her wedding. Recounting them, she would be lost in delirium as if relishing every bite in a flashback. In a sincere effort to please her longing-for-sweets friend, Chuhiya overcomes her sense of humiliation at the penny received by begging and buys a hot little laddoo for Bua. She places it next to her and hides to catch her excited unawares. Bua awakened by the rich aroma emitted by the sweetis bewildered at sight. Fearing that it would vanish as her past dreams, she immediately gobbles up the little globe. It was a sin for her, Chuhiya later realized when the sick Bua choked and passed away. "What a paltry thing to deny an old woman"(148) commented Sidhwa. Shakuntala mildly placating Chuhiya says: "After eating the laddoo, she will go to heaven"(117).

However, it is miserable Kalyani's plight that evokes the essence of goddess Durga in Shakuntala. Infuriated at the revelation of a new law concerning widow – remarriage by Sadananda, it dawned upon her that Madhu Mati had deliberately concealed the news from everyone in the ashram. "We must live in purity to die in purity."(144)

These hollow words of Madhu Mati were nothing but a devious means to satisfy her selfish ends. In a train of agitated thoughts, Shakuntala barged into Madhu Mati's room snatched the keys from her and set Kalyani free to marry Narayan. This indomitable courage and fight for survival is the forte of Sidhwa's protagonists. At Kalyani's cremation, while offering final prayers, she wonders at the short span of Kalyani's life tempered with injustice and cruel fate. Conscience and faith conflicted in her soul. Sadananda's comment upon Mahatama Gandhi that he is among few men who listen to their conscience, she finally gives vent to her perplexing thoughts: "But what if our conscience conflicts without faith?"(184)

It is the 'conscience' that Shakuntala ultimately chooses when it comes to lax intentions of society towards Chuhiya. After Kalyani, vicious Madhu Mati pimped Chuhiya to maintain a steady income. Ferocious as a lioness, Shakuntala with bruised Chuhiya in her lap and an inner – turmoil joins a mob that takes her to the railway station to meet Gandhiji. Sadananda had once asked whether she was any close to self – liberation, she had confessed: "If self – liberation means detachment from worldly desires, then no, I'm no closer to it." (95)

However, today, after Gandhiji had delivered an inspiring speech, Shakuntala finally realized her goal. She had been



in pursuit of Truth, and now she knew that "Truth is God". She had finally worked her salvation.

Thus, Shakuntala hands the little girl to Narayan on the departing train so that buoyant Chuhiya's life was saved from retrogressing into the regimented life of widows precisely that of Kalyani's. Once again, life and hope are affirmed in the novel of Sidhwa as Shakuntala feels herself from the confines of superstitions and restores life to a deserving child.

Apart from Chuhiya, it is her friend Kalyani, a young woman of nineteen years, whose misery and haplessness attracts our attention most. Her only attempt in the short span of her life to be happy fails disastrously and too much to bear it, she succumbs to her emotional trauma and kills herself. The plight of Kalyani is an illustration by Sidhwa to exhibit the plight of every woman for whom her beauty and body becomes a curse. Widowed at the age of nine like Chuhiya, she too was brought to ashram wide-eyed and restless. Nevertheless, she was not fortunate enough to escape from the malpractices of the pretentious upper castes. The ridicule and sarcasm are sharp in Rabindra's pronouncement: "The gentry here have an "unnatural concern" for the widow." (73)

Defenceless and wearisome Kalyani had learnt to live with her adversity until she met Narayan. Nevertheless, it is not long after she revealed in her love that her predicament doubled. The name of Narayan's father – Seth Dwarka Nath – inflicts mortal wounds on Kalyani's life. Agitated Narayan disillusioned by the misdeeds of his respectful father now confronts him for his misdeeds. His sordid reply 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, an idealist, and a modal human being deciphered that he was a society where even the elite men could not sympathize with widows living in renunciation and liberate themselves from lust to practice much-advocated self – control.

'Water' ends on a tenuous note of hope. However, the story is still just as relevant as a reminder of how unthinking adherence to tradition can lord it over reason and humanity.

### III. CONCLUSION

Sidhwa has written a truly stunning novel which reveals the fact that even today there are widow ashrams in Varanasi. Their inhabitants may not be as young as Chuyia,

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but the very fact that they still exist in the twenty-first century should rankle us.

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After reading the novel, the thoughts of any reader would be sufficiently disturbed, pitying the sorrow each widow has gone through over centuries. One feels alarmed enough to make right every wrong that has been done to these helpless innocent individuals. Life to the widows was nothing but living a perpetual hell restlessly awaiting death from the age of eight to eighty. 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. Stress is being laid to protect and educate the girl-child and widow-remarriage is being encouraged. At least the condition of women in India is not as deplorable as that of in Pakistan or other backward countries. We hope more of such enlightened social activists and writers come to the forefront and rescue our society from regressing into unfathomable depths.

Notes:

1. <http://pakistanpaindabad.blogspot.com/2007/06/bapsi-sidhwa-i-wrote-naturallyabout.html>(<http://pakistanpaindabad.blogspot.com/2007/06/bapsi-sidhwa-i-wrote-naturally-about.html>)
2. <http://pakistanpaindabad.blogspot.com/2007/06/bapsi-sidhwa-i-wrote-naturallyabout.html>(<http://pakistanpaindabad.blogspot.com/2007/06/bapsi-sidhwa-i-wrotenaturally-about.html>)
3. <http://pakistanpaindabad.blogspot.com/2007/06/bapsi-sidhwa-i-wrote-naturallyabout.html>(<http://pakistanpaindabad.blogspot.com/2007/06/bapsi-sidhwa-i-wrote-naturally-about.html>)

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