

**ADVOCACY OF RESISTANCE AND REBELLION AGAINST SHACKLES OF WIDOWHOOD  
IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S NOVEL WATER****Dr. Avinash L. Pandhare**

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Email Id: [avinash.pandhare265@gmail.com](mailto:avinash.pandhare265@gmail.com)**Abstracts**

This article aims to discuss how Bapsi Sidhwa depicts plight of widows, and how she advocates resistance and rebellion against restraints of widowhood. Sidhwa's novel *Water* (2006) deals with lives of Indian widows. The novel describes subjugation and oppression women undergo after death of their husbands. The story is set in pre-independence era when the freedom struggle was at its peak. This is a story of Chuhiya, the protagonist, who gets married at a very young age, and who becomes a widow soon after the marriage. The novel portrays, in the course of the plot, few other women who are widows too, and who also suffer disastrous fate only because of widowhood. They are Kalyani, Madhumati and Shakuntala. The novel puts on record the social and religious restraints that are responsible for women's inferior status in the society. It also makes an account of discriminatory attitudes and customs cultivated and practiced by the then 'male' dominated patriarchal society towards women. The condition of widows was even more pathetic and worse. The author attempts to expose the falsehood and impracticality of social and religious sanctions. The novel rejects those wrong practices that throw women in the ocean of agonies; and promoter resistance and rebellion against fetters of widowhood as well as patriarchy. Though the novel is set in 1940s, it still works as an eye opener regarding our treatment towards widows (women in general) around us. It makes us aware that we must give equal status to women. Sidhwa tries to bring home to all women that only rebellion and resistance against all discriminatory customs and practices will fetch equal status for them.

**Key Words:** Widowhood, Marginalization, Subjugation, Resistance, Rejection.

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Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water* (2006) deals with lives of Indian widows. Actually, this novel is an adoption of a movie of same title (*Water*) which was directed by Deepa Mehta. The novel describes subjugation and oppression women undergo after death of their husbands. The story is set in pre-independence era when superstitions and outdated customs were high on the minds of people.

Before discussing the novel under study, let's cast a glance on Indian literature written on or about widows. Actually, widows were new entrants in the society. Up to 18<sup>th</sup> century Indian society had no such members called widows. Thanks to The Bengal Sati Regulation (1829) which banned *Sati Pratha* (where a woman immolated herself on her husband's pyre). However, widows were only saved from self-immolation, and weren't given

opportunities to lead a life of self respect and happiness. For a very long-time widows were treated as non-existing non-entity. They were denied everything and were forced to lead deathly and direful lives. Themes regarding lives of widows started reflecting in literature from the mid of 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the enactment of Widows' Remarriage Act in 1856. The literature then focused on the issues of widows, their lives after widowhood, the agonies, oppression by society, etc. Rajul Sogani makes a thorough study of novels about widows in his book *The Hindu Widow in Indian Literature* (2002), and asserts that there are two trends in Indian novel written on widows: documentary novel and romantic novel. He further distinguishes between them in the following terms:

The documentary novel which presents social problems realistically and suggests possible solutions to them; and the romantic novel which explores the complexities of human relationships and the moral conflicts within an individual or a community arising from the norms prevalent in that community. While the documentary novel records social reality, the romantic novel raises moral issues. (30)

Several novels were written on widows during this era. They appeared in different languages of India. Baba Padmanji Muley's Marathi novel *Yamuna Paryatan* (1857) is one of the earliest novels that discuss problems of widows. Rajul Sogani admits that "By the 1920s, widowhood became established as a major theme in both longer and shorter works of Indian fiction" (19). Among other notable works of this kind are Shanta Debi's *Jeehandola* (The Swing of Life, 1930) and Kuntala Kumari Sabat's *Kali Bohu* (1925). The earliest examples of novels written in English are *Ratanbai: A Sketch of Bombay High Caste Hindu Young Wife* (1895) and *Saguna* (1895). The novel *Ratanbai*, written by Shevantibai Nikambe, focuses on the problems of high caste widowhood and importance of women's education (Sen 5). *Saguna* was written by Krupabai Sathianadhan, and also deals with women's subjugation and oppression because of patriarchal pattern of the society (Sen 11). As far as the novels about widows, there are two categories: novels written by men writers and novels written by women writers. There lies a vast difference in novels written by a male writer and by a female writer. Rajul Sogani records:

Women's positive self-assertion finds expression more often in the novels written by women than in those by men. Assertive widows in men's novels are often shown as rebels and transgressors guilty of defying society and disrupting the moral order... In women's novels, such women make for strong protagonists who transcend their widowhood to achieve their full human potential and, in the process, bond with other women to fight a common battle against social injustice. (180)

Though the term was yet to come in use, the novel writing of that time clearly shows the elements of feminism. Women writers of 19<sup>th</sup> century had not shown that much courage to include widow remarriages in their plot. However, they never failed in their duty of portraying widows in conflict with society while attempting to acquire life of self respect for themselves. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* presents the similar trait in its plot.

Chuhiya, Kalyani, Narayan, Shakuntala and Madhumati are the major characters of the novel. Narayan is a young fellow who believes in Gandhian principles. Kalyani is a widow who falls in love with Narayan. However, the plot revolves around Chuhiya, an eight years old girl. At a very young age of playing, going to school and having fun of life Chuhiya gets married. Unfortunately, she becomes a widow soon after the marriage. After her husband's death, she has been sent to an Ashram meant for widows only. She is left there to spend her remaining life in utter agonies and sufferings. The novel portrays, in the course of the story, few other women who are widows too, and who suffer the disastrous fate only because of the widowhood. They are Kalyani, Madhumati and Shakuntala. Of

these, Kalyani and Shakuntala always console Chuhiya and make their best attempt to decrease her sufferings. Shakuntala desperately attempts to save Chuhiya from being thrown into prostitution. Eventually, she succeeds in sending Chuhiya out of the Ashram (and away from prostitution) when she hands her over to Narayan onboard a train.

As stated earlier, the novel brings forth subjugation and oppression of widows. Traditionally, a woman loses her social status and rights with death of her husband. She is denied every pleasure and luxury of life. She has been treated as burden on family. As such she receives ill-treatment from family members – male as well as female. Once adored by the whole family, instantly, with the death of her husband, a woman becomes a threat to the family. The centre stage in the novel *Water* is a widow ashram. All inmates are sufferers of ill-treatment and suppression. Through various characters Bapsi Sidhwa depicts the plight of widows. Shakuntala, a middle-aged widow, suffers greatly due to the widowhood. She receives very cruel treatment from her in-laws. Her head is shaved. All good clothes are wiped off her body. The novel presents the pathetic scene of ill-treatment received by Shakuntala:

She [Shakuntala] was not only viewed as responsible for her husband's death, but also as a threat to her husband's family... Her grief was compounded by her ill treatment at the hands of her in-laws... She was stripped of all her jewellery and possessions and could cover her body with only a piece of white cloth; she was essentially slowly starved, as she was limited to one meal a day—and a meagre one of unseasoned rice and *daal* at that—to cleanse her body of lust. She had to sleep on the ground. (Sidhwa 111)

Madhumati, another widow from the novel, is also a victim. She describes her agonies: “The two bastards [her brothers-in-law] raped me for a week. I was shorn and beaten and taken twenty miles into the wilderness and discarded!” (Sidhwa 55). Almost every widow underwent the same fate. They were assaulted sexually. Some of them forced to prostitution. Kalyani is the example of how widows were sent to clients, and were ultimately thrown into the hell of prostitution.

Sidhwa's novels always depict the sufferings of the marginalized groups of society. In the novel under consideration the marginalized are women or widows in particular. Chuhiya, Kalyani, Shakuntala all are marginalized. Marginalization is inflicted on them by family members in the name of social and/or religious sanctions. After her husband's death Chuhiya has been sent to an ashram and not to her parents. Actually, at that tender age, Chuhiya required parental care more than anything else. But the customs of society forced her to lead a wretched life in the widow ashram. The widows have to sing and dance in temples in order get food to eat. Sidhwa describes “The widows were given a cup of rice and a fistful of lentils for every eight-hour session of singing and dancing. For many widows, this was their only means of sustenance. On those days when a widow was too sick to perform, she starved” (40). The condition of widows in the ashram is, more or less, similar. Commenting on the agonies of widowhood, Bhagya, Chuhiya's mother, speaks:

Once widowed, a woman... ceased to exist as a person; she was no longer either daughter or daughter-in-law. There was no place for her in the community, and she was viewed as a threat to society. A woman's sexuality and fertility, which was so valuable to her husband in his lifetime, was converted upon his death into a potential danger to the morality of the community. (Sidhwa 24-25)

Women, already marginalized group, cease to exist as human beings once they become widows. Bapsi Sidhwa voices the cries of the marginalized section of the society.

This novel also presents few other issues regarding women's lives. These are gender inequality and child marriages. Chuhiya is just eight years of age when she has been put into a marriage. This was a very serious issue in India, especially during pre-independence period. Child marriage brings devastating consequences for child bride. It destroys girls' education and ruins their health. Pregnancy at very young age is dangerous and sometimes proves fatal. Ultimately child marriage proves disaster for a child bride. In child marriages girls were married at a very tender age. Sometimes the bride and the groom were of same age or age group. But most of the times young girls were married to an adult or an aged man. The same happens with Chuhiya in the novel. Her husband Hira Lal is of 50 years. No one even bothers about the huge age difference that lies between them. Everything is neglected under the cover of social and religious customs.

The novel *Water* brings forth the issue of gender inequality too. Sidhwa gives several examples in this regard. Indian society was (to some extent still today also) a patriarchal society. Men have been given utmost importance whereas women are considered as subordinate. This principle (actually a myth) has been internalized so greatly that even women consider themselves inferior and always keep men at upper rank. In the novel *Water*, Chuhiya's mother Bhagya showers more affection on her sons than she does on Chuhiya:

Bhagya was not given to looking at her daughter so closely. She often gazed upon her sons as they slept. She covertly observed them when they were absorbed in school work or having the extra portion of food, she had saved for them, and then her heart brimmed over with love and the special pride that was her due as mother of sons. (Sidhwa 14)

This happens solely because of an impact of patriarchal pattern of society. Having sons has been hailed even by women (mothers). The birth of a baby boy is celebrated and that of a baby girl is cursed. Chuhiya's father's statement is worth to be cited here. He asserts that "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!" (Sidhwa 13). No doubt, the nature has given this peculiar attribute to women that they can conceive and give birth to babies. However, a glance must be cast on the words come out of Somnath, Chuhiya's father. He doesn't say CHILDREN but says SONS. Through this tricky use of words, the writer brings before us that patriarchy had strong hold on the minds of people. Moreover, girls, when grown up, are considered as trouble on the family. The members of the family desperately desire to tie her into conjugal knot and get rid of the trouble. This does not happen with boys. Chuhiya, at the age of eight, has also been considered a burden. Her father remarks: "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" (Sidhwa 12-13). Women have no existence without their husbands. Her father continues: "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" (Sidhwa 13). However, the same thing is not applied to men. They are a significant entity with or without wives. A widow is criticized and cursed but a widower never undergoes such ill-treatment. This is how our society cultivates two different outlook and approach towards men and women.

The most important aspect that the novel *Water* endorses is resistance and rebellion. The writer strongly advocates rejection of wrong and dead customs. Chuhiya, though just eight years old, is determined and courageous. She possesses an element of protest in her character. She takes all aback when she enquires "Didi, where is the house for the men widows?" (62-63). In the widow ashram, Madhumati tries to console Chuhiya by saying that widows

have existence after death of their husbands. They are ‘half dead’. The story unfolds the fact that Chuhiya is not ready to accept what comes to her way. She rejects all those stereo typed theories about widows. She asserts the existence of widow by saying that “She is half alive”, and shows her determination when she says “I don’t want to be a stupid widow!” (36). As remarked by Rajul Sogani, Bapsi Sidhwa (a woman writer) makes for a strong protagonist in Chuhiya. Another instance of rebellion is evident in Kalyani’s case. When widows are not allowed to remarry, Kalyani falls in love with Narayan and wants to elope with him. Her love affair is itself an act of resistance and rebellion. It’s a huge blow on dead customs of society. Shakuntala, another character from the novel, undergoes a great transformation. Her journey starts from an obedient follower of scripture & rules, and ends as a rebellious woman. She gradually develops rationality, and at one point she even asks the priest: “Panditji, I have read the Holy Books without questioning them. But you have studied all the Holy Scriptures . . . I have great respect for your learning . . . Panditji, is it written that widows should be treated badly?” (Sidhwa 116-17). Kalyani’s tragic death and Chuhiya’s sufferings bring great change in her character. So much so that she goes against the rules of the ashram, against the society, and dares to rescue Chuhiya from being forced into prostitution and from shackles of widowhood. Bhagya shows some resistance when her husband talks about marrying her daughter to a man of fifty years old. She jerks out “And you [her husband] think that man will be able to satisfy her stri-svavahava? By the time her womanhood blooms, he’ll be old and spent” (13). But that courage does not last longer.

In the conclusion, I put that Bapsi Sidhwa has given a brilliant novel that records the atrocities inflicted on women. The writer brings forth the pathetic life of widows. The reality about widows comes in a pinching manner. The author attempts to expose the falsehood and impracticality of social and religious sanctions. The novel rejects those wrong practices that throw women in the ocean of agonies; and advocates resistance and rebellion against fetters of widowhood as well as of patriarchy. Though the novel is set in 1940s, it still works as an eye opener regarding our treatment towards widows (women in general) around us. It makes us aware that we must give equal status to women. Sidhwa tries to bring home to all women that rebellion and resistance against all discriminatory customs and practices will only fetch equal status for them. Had Chuhiya’s mother shown courage at the time of Chuhiya’s marriage, had Chuhiya’s mother-in-law rejected social customs after her son’s death and behaved considerately, Chuhiya would not have thrown into agonies. Had women from ages shown resistance and rebellion, millions of widows (women) would have escaped devastating and miserable lot.

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