



Bapsi Sidhwa's "Water": A tale of trauma

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Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa is a very forceful voice in the world of feministic writings of the Indian sub-continent. She took partition to the world. Belonging to a minority group of Pasis in Pakistan, she always remained unwavered in her attempt to raise her protest against female exploitation by patriarchal dominance in the societies of the Indian sub-continent. Through her novels and other writings she presents to the world the traumatic experience of the female characters caused due to male oriented social customs and practices. Sidhwa's writings express a voice that breaks through the power structure of inequality as propounded and propagated by patriarchy.

"Water: a Novel" (2006), the fifth novel by Sidhwa is another milestone in the contemporary world of feministic literature wherein she exposes the cruelties imposed on the women and their victimization through her female characters. This paper explores the various dimensions of the trauma through which the female characters like Chuyia, Kalyani and others go. It sensitizes the readers and scholars alike to the power structure of inequality as propounded and propagated by patriarchy in the region which is the root cause of this trauma.

Key words: Feminist, patriarchy, marginalised, parsi, exploitation, victimization, trauma, ashram, marriage, widow, dominant

One of the most striking features of the contemporary literature in English from the Indian subcontinent has been the sprouting 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 male dominant society. Bapsi Sidhwa, an internationally renowned novelist from the Indian subcontinent, was born and bred in Pakistan and like other women writers gives voice to her feministic ideologies through her fiction.

Pakistani literature is a distinct literature that gradually came to be defined after Pakistan gained nationhood status in 1947 and emerged out of the literary traditions of the Indian subcontinent. The shared tradition of Urdu literature and English literature of British India was inherited by the newly independent state, Pakistan and emerged in nearly all major Pakistani languages including Urdu, English, Punjabi, Baluchi, Pashto and Sindhi. The nature of Pakistani literature soon after independence aroused controversy among writers due to it being relied heavily on the negative events related to the India-Pakistan partition. India and Pakistan enjoyed a common literary and cultural heritage till partition in 1947 but parted away in trends and achievements after partition.

In Pakistan women writers have traditionally found themselves doubly marginalised. Bapsi Sidhwa was one of the first women from Pakistan to write fiction in English and get it published internationally. Bapsi Sidhwa found ready publishers and eager audience abroad before becoming known in her own country where not much was known or read of contemporary women writers.

Now, Bapsi Sidhwa is the most familiar voice in Pakistani writings in English and a new and considerable voice in the world of Commonwealth fiction. Bapsi Sidhwa is such a writer as cannot be easily labelled.

Sidhwa was born on August 11, 1938 in Karachi into an eminent Parsi family. Soon after Sidhwa was born, her family moved to Lahore, however there were a few Parsis and the Bhandara family was cut off from the mainstream Parsi life. This multi language cultural background is pivotal to Sidhwa's work. In 1978, at a time when publishing in English was practically non-existent in Pakistan, Sidhwa self published her novel "The Crow Eaters". Since then, it has been published and translated in numerous European and Asian countries while "The Pakistani bride" (1982) was the second novel Sidhwa wrote which was published in India first. "Ice Candy Man" which was later re-titled as "Cracking India" was the third novel which received "The recipient of the literature prize" in Germany and was nominated by the American literary Association as a notable book the same year. "An American Brat" was published in 1993 and "Water: A Novel," Sidhwa's last novel was published in 2006.

Sidhwa was a member of the Parsi Zoroastrian sect, a distinctive minority, who, in the 7th century had left Iran for South Asia in order to avoid religious persecution. Her novels present the accounts of the Parsi's mind, social behaviour, customs and value systems. She also possesses a fearless individual voice which is never subjugated by the presence of a deep ethnic awareness. Despite including lengthy descriptions of Parsi rituals and gatherings, her novels never degenerate into bare sociological documentations. Sidhwa exposes the issue of murder, rape, exploitation, enslavement, and homelessness of women in her works.

Sidhwa's all the five novels are about her perception of life as a Parsi, Punjabi, Pakistani and American woman respectively. Other major works include books "City of Sin and Splendor", "Writings on Lahore", "Jungle Wala Saheb" and "Omnibus." In addition, her stories, reviews and articles have appeared in New York Time book Review, Houston Chronicle, Harper's and Queen, The Economic Times and the London Telegraph. Sidhwa believes that all her novels have some degree of autobiographical elements. She picks up some significant incidents from her own life or from the lives of other people and flashes them out to create a larger reality of fiction.

In her writings, Sidhwa not only observes but also analyses man's degrading attentions towards women, voraciousness of male sexual desires, man's reduction of woman to the status of sexual objects, and victimization of woman at the hands of the man. They projects realistically women's plight and exploitation in the patriarchal society. They also depict how women endure the trauma that comes through pain and humiliation enacted upon them. Her writings make an attempt at self assertion and expression of freedom and dignity of an individual especially females. To her every aspect of society and history is a patriarchal construction. Marriage morality in terms of the definitions of respectability, kinship and citizenship, knowledge and access to learning has all been male oriented. Sidhwa's writings express a voice that breaks through the power structure of inequality as propounded and propagated by patriarchy.

This paper aims at critically analysing the novel "Water" by Sidhwa and sensitizing the readers about the cruelties imposed on the women and their victimization. Bapsi Sidhwa's "Water" begins with the innocent girl Chuiya, who is playing with her clay dolls. Chuiya is the daughter of Bhagyalakshmi and Somnath. Chuiya is the most winsome of all the characters in the novel. She grows up along with her brothers Prasad and Mohan in a traditional Brahmin family. Her brothers attend school while she helps her mother at house with her chores. Somnath is a poor Brahman priest and wants her daughter to get married with Hiralal who is 44 years old. At such tender age, Chuiya has the least ides what trauma she is going to suffer as a result of this marriage. But Chuiya's mother is concerned about her with regards to Hira lal, her would be son-in-law: "I've heard Hira Lal is a grandfather." (Water 13).

Somnath is satisfied that they don't want a dowry and will pay for the wedding. Bhagyalakshmi again expresses her concern about Hira Lal's age as she says: "By the time her womanhood blooms, he'll be old and spent." (14). But Somnath, Chuyia's father, a poor Brahmin priest, dismisses his wife's concerns about Chuyia's age with this authoritative quote from the shastras:

"In the Brahmanical tradition," said Somnath, shifting into the soothing and at the same time authoritative mode he adopted when speaking to his clients, "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 Soubhagyavati, a fortunate woman." And, as if recalling a passage from a holy book, he half-closed his lids to add, "A woman's body is a site for conflict between a demonic *stri-svavahava* which is her lustful aspect, and her *stri-dharma*, which is her womanly duty." (14) Thus, her husband has the last word and she thinks that he is right.

Chuyia's father Somnath feels somewhat happy about her marriage because Hira Lal's family doesn't want any dowry for their wedding. Bhagya is concerned about Hira Lal's age but she consoles herself by thinking about her husband's situation. The marriage ceremony takes place at a temple, where only Brahmins are allowed to enter. Chuyia looks like a doll, sitting in front of Hira Lal. He applies the red sindoor to the parting in Chuyia's hair and to her forehead. He offers her a new sari with which she covers her head, and with this act the couple is considered officially married. She gets married without even having a realization of the sanctity of the institution of marriage. According to Indian culture, a woman was not expected to have a voice of her own beyond the periphery of marriage. They are also made to think that a woman's role in life is to get married and have children. The husband is given the authority of a ruler to control the destiny of woman.

Another trauma awaits Chuyia when her marriage turns unsuccessful. Her husband also dies and her father brings her to ashram where all the widows stay. There also she suffers a lot. When Chuyia's father tells her, "you are a widow now", she asks, "For how long Baba?" (29) No one can expect a girl of eight who is little aware of the marriage, to accept the widowhood. The male domination and prevailing superstitions have made woman so hard hearted that she becomes cruel towards her own sex.

In the novel, another character who suffers trauma is Kalyani, whose life is like Chuyia's. Kalyani looks very beautiful. Her mother died before she had her first birthday. So she is forced to marry a man who is sixty when she was only six at that time. This was the first traumatic experience for her which was soon to be followed by next after her husband dies within a few years of their marriage.

After her husband's death, her head is shaved against her wishes but Madhumati allows her to grow her hair back because she wants to force her into prostitution. Inside the ashram she meets Narayan, a young upper class Gandhian idealist and in whom she sees a ray of hope. She admires his beauty. She speaks to Narayan through Chuyia. Chuyia becomes the secret emissary carrying little notes from Narayan and conveying Kalyani's verbal answers to them. Narayan reveals his love with Kalyani to his mother. His mother is shocked and she shouts at her son for selecting a widow as a bride. Narayan is a Gandhian and also a rationalist who questions the patriarchal laws and points out at the end of the story, after Kalyani's death, the injustice laid down by the lawmakers of the ancient age that have institutionalized male dominance over women. The purity of the Kalyani - Narayan romance reaches its highest celebration when Narayan expresses his love by reciting some Sanskrit verses of Kalidasa's classic "Meghaduta", a poem about the pangs of separation between lovers, foretelling at the same time their future parting.

In the novel, their relationship serves as a powerful contrast to Kalyani's enforced prostitution, which is enjoyed by Narayan's father, a wealthy landowner (zamindar), who secretly uses her for his pleasure and hypocritically calls her a whore. Narayan's love for Kalyani is far removed from his father's lust, his feelings being even nobler as motivated by the Gandhian ideals of emancipating her from widowhood by making her his wife. Like Chuyia, Kalyani has been led to prostitution unwillingly. After having fallen in love with Narayan, she finds herself no longer capable of living as a passive victim of patriarchal oppression.

Two cultures cannot meet, be they of Pakistan and America or the mountains and the plains. Sidhwa feels that the rules of the society, the old traditional male made rules, are meant to be followed by women only. In the novel, "Water" Chuyia's total lack of comprehension and anger at being left at the doorstep of a strange place by her own father and the screams for her mother is an image made more pathetic by Sidhwa's understated description as seen through the eyes of a bewildered child. At this time, the author attentively observes how Chuyia's father reverts helplessly to the harsh reality of sending her daughter to a colony of widows, Vidhwa ashram, highlighting the fact that in rigid male dominant systems, every human being is a victim of the violence and un-humanness that support them.

Inside this male dominant system, the widow constitutes threat to society as she is perceived to be inauspicious and polluted, because of her association with death and sexually dangerous as she becomes desirable and uncontrolled by a male counterpart. The disfiguring of her body is enforced in order to reduce her attractiveness as women by transforming them into sexual beings by prohibiting them from wearing the symbols of marriage - vermilion mark, bangles, marriage pendant, and more deeply traumatic, having their heads shaven.

The brutal transmutation of Chuyia's body being shown as a trademark of her civil death, and the strict severance from old ties marks the beginning of the miserable life that awaits her in the destitute widow's house. With her white sari and bald yellow head, Chuyia is a very different child from the girl who - had ridden in the bullock cart. (44) Indifferent to Chuyia's tears, Madhumathi, a soulless grotesque figure whose every word is law in the ashram, tells the child:

"Our Holy Books Say, 'A wife is part of her husband while he's alive.' Right?" The widows nodded their heads in solemn concurrence. "And when our husbands die, God help us, the wives also half die." She paused for effect and sighed dramatically. "So, how can a poor half-dead woman feel any pain"? She asked, not really expecting any answer. Chuyia, her tears still slipping down her face, raised her head, and between sniffles, replied with a child's innocent logic, "because she's half alive"? (52)"

Through the passage of time, Chuyia's resilience is tempered and she begins to accept the austere ways adopted by the other widows. The rest of the novel revolves around the lives of the widows in the ashram, around the beautiful young Kalyani, the only widow whose head is shorn, around Shakuntala whose belief in the scriptures is unwavering and absolute, and around Chuyia.

The novelist's distressing depiction of governing of the daily life of the abandoned widows in the ashram, and the fear, disregard and contempt, with which the outside world views them, creates an awesome picture in the minds of the readers. They are not allowed to eat spicy food, wear colourful clothes or adorn themselves because as per the patriarchal order, their active sexuality, without any male restraint, threatens the moral order of the society. They are destined to suffer till their death. The tradition-bound society forces them to remain isolated and suffer the trauma. Because of this they have no ray of hope and life for them. Chuyia suffers a lot first at the hands of her father, husband, and in-laws and later in the ashram.

Sidhwa's novel "Water" can be seen as a victimization of women to break through the constraints of patriarchal society and discover themselves as human beings. They are shown as the victims of male world and the role that a traditional society forces on them. It also reveals the inner consciousness of mind and feelings of women's hearts in relation to the outer world. A deeper insight into her women characters, who live in a widow ashram, reveals them not as different characters with lives interwoven, rather as five stages of woman's life in a circle that undergoes repression of emotions and desires of various degrees.

Women victimization is one of the evils confronting women all over the world. Women being extremely vulnerable are easy targets of any form of oppression, humiliation, deprivation and discrimination. This demonstrates the fact that inequality of sexes is neither a biological fact nor a divine mandate but a cultural construct.

“Water” is a novel about South Asian societies characterized by a mind divided similar to the one that existed in the classical Western Cartesian philosophy. Marked by a distinct and dominant reverence of religion in everyday life, these societies exhibit a clear inclination to the spiritual world over the material, rationality over corporeality, and consequently, men over women.

Set in the historical context of a pro-independence Indian Society, the novel revolves around the themes of victimization due to marriage and widowhood. It is linked and dominated by images of women who are primarily conceived in terms of the corporeality and sexuality of their bodies. Sidhwa shows that in “Water,” most of the societies in Indian subcontinent consistently objectify and essentialize a woman's body in terms of its physiological reproductive function. They use it as an excuse to reduce the position of a woman in society to the role of a wife and mother. The characters of Chuyia, Kalyani and Sakhuntala in “Water” illustrate that in the prevalent patriarchal cultural norms and customs of Pakistani society and the dominant socio-religious doctrines of India, a woman fails to attain the legitimacy of an independent self or an individual being like that of a man.

In the twenty-first Century, women writers' works are considered as a powerful medium, which changes the social life of women. Their novels consist of the latest burning issues related to women as well as those issues that existed in the society. They describe the whole world of women with simply stunning frankness. The majority of these works depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated women.

Bapsi Sidhwa's protagonists are mainly women who suffer continuous trauma despite the fact that they invariably win against men in their struggle for survival and honour. In “Water,” Chuyia, too, escaped in the end of the novel. Thus, they resolve their crisis in their own way. The fact that her novels have been translated into several languages and published in numerous European and Asian countries shows her popularity across the world and also the adaptability of her art. Though her literary output is meagre, she holds a very special place among contemporary writers of English fiction in the subcontinent. To know her and her writings further research still needs to be done on her writings.

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