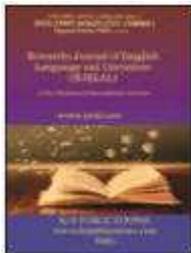




WIDOWS' REBEL AGAINST STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE OF PATRIARCHY IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S *WATER*: A CRITICAL OUTLOOK

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ABSTRACT

This article is the humble attempt to deal with the plight of women especially the unheard outcry of widows prior to independence (1930s.) In a society where a woman is epitomized as a goddess she also appears as target and victim of strict conventions, traditions as well as lust and greed of men. The dark side of Hindu culture and the patriarchal system, which has prevailed over most of recorded history, there is not only rape, wife battering, incest, and other structural form of violence by men dominating women lot. This article traces many untold miserable stories of widows at widow ashrams and how they rebel in order to re-assert their right to freedom. Also, the paper highlights the powerful and thought provoking theme as both fictional and cinematic text- *water*.

Keywords: Widows, Hindu Culture, Patriarchy System, and Widow Ashrams.

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Violence on women is rooted in Indian history and culture as well. The culture of our society is structured in every way that leads to exploitation of women. Structural violence is introduced by Halting in 1969. According to him structural violence is an "avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs." It is a curse on women devouring them physically, sexually, psychologically and economically, In her touching novel *water* (derived from the script of Deepa Mehtha's film *water*). Bapsi Sidhwa tells the heartbreaking stories of widows and their lives in widow ashram starting from the youngest widow Chuyia who is just eight years old to the aged widow Bau. Women in patriarchal society belittle their worth and purpose in life to simply satisfying the needs of their husband and reproducing the sons. Somnath argues with her wife regarding Chuyia's marriage with forty year widower:

A girl is destined to leave her parents'... 'a woman is recognised as a person only she is one with her husband'... 'outside of marriage the wife has no recognised existence in our tradition. A woman's role in life is to get married and have son's. That is why she is created: to have son's! That is all!'(7-8).

As a novelist, Bapsi Sidhwa exposes the inherent indifference, fatalism and violence latent in orthodox Hinduism. Chuyia is forced into marriage to a man old enough to be her grandfather, performing all the rituals of Hindu customs of Bengal and Bihar. With all her childish innocence she enjoys her marriage. But her happiness does not last long. Her distress follows the death of her elderly husband, leaving the child as a widow. At the age of eight, she is compelled to leave the warmth of the family and abandoned at a widows' ashram. The main aim of Sidhwa is to show exploitation of women especially that of widows by the people

around them and how they are dragged into prostitution. The novel takes the most controversial issues including patriarchy, religion, corruption, poverty, child prostitution and hidden love through the stories of four widows like Chuyia, Kalyani, Madhumathi, Gulabi and Shakuntala.

The loveliest distressing depiction of the social mores governing the daily life of the abandoned widows, and the fear, disregard and contempt with which the outside world views them, creates an awesome picture on the minds of the readers. Helpless widows are destined to suffer until they die. The tradition-bound society forces them to remain isolated. No ray of hope for a better life. Poor widows shave their heads, give up all the material possessions, cloth themselves in a plain cotton sari without the benefit of even a blouse; they live on just one meal a day as the tradition demands. Defiant, a feisty Chuyia, gradually accepts her fate. The other widows in the ashram Madhumathi, Bau, Shakunthala, Kalyani, Gulabi are also forced to choose a path of self deprivation in their tender ages.

Almost forty years before, Madhumathi became widow, she was raped, beaten and taken twenty miles into wilderness by two men. She was saved by Gulabi and brought to ashram. Another helpless widow Bau, comes from a landowners family. At the age of thirty five she was hounded out of her house when her husband dies. Until she is seventy she has sung her lungs out for a cup of rice and an occasional cowries flung at her. Shakunthala reached ashram when she was thirty. She is married to a young widower in hope that she would fulfill his debt to their forefathers by reproducing sons. As the years passed her mother-in law becomes increasingly hateful towards her barren daughter-in-law. A man is not questioned for his impotence. Her only useful role, that of wife and producer of sons comes to an end with the death of her husband. She is not only viewed as responsible for her husband's death but also as a threat to husband's family. She feels that all eyes are watching and waiting for her to commit some sin that will bring curses on them and consign her husband to hell. So she takes shelter at ashram. Kalyani's fate is similar to that of Chuyia's. Kalyani is

a beautiful but an unfortunate girl. She lost her mother when she is not even one year old. She is sold in marriage to the highest bidder, a man of sixty when she is six. When she becomes a widow, her head is shaven and brought to ashram. But Madhumathi, the head of ashram allows her to grow hair because she wants to force her into prostitution for the financial support of the ashram.

Stri – dharma in Brahmanical tradition has two options for a widow. She can follow sati or if the family permits, she may marry her dead husband's brother. These kinds of traditional rules are not applied for men. They are allowed to remarry, keep mistresses or visit prostitutes. "Our holy texts say Brahmins can sleep with whoever they want, and the women they sleep with are blessed" (74). Sidhwa exposes the hypocrisy and double standards of Indian society in the 1930's, especially with unfortunate widows. The novel unfolds into deeper dramatic dimensions when Kalyani meets Narayan, a young upper - class Gandhian idealist and a follower of Quit India Movement. Narayan's father, a wealthy land owner, secretly uses Kalyani for his sensual pleasures. When he comes to know that Narayan wants to marry Kalyani, he hypocritically calls her a whore. In contrast Narayan's love for Kalyani is far removed from his father's lust. She is forced into prostitution but after she falls in love with Narayan, she finds it difficult to be a passive victim of patriarchal oppression. Here, Sidhwa invokes rich implications of rebellion- the defiance of institutionalized segregation, the challenge of enforced oppression, and the rejection of patriarchal demands on a woman's body. The forbidden affair boldly defies Hindu tradition and threatens to undermine the ashram's delicate balance of power.

Sidhwa is an able writer who could identify major power structures' responsibility for the victimization of widows. The Brahminism represents holy texts to subjugate women and widows. The patriarchal hegemony of rich land lords with their over and hypocritical concern for institutionalized widows exploit them for their own physical needs. *Water* very powerfully portrays all this criminal patriarchy in Indian society, leaving an impeccable impact on the readers.

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