



IDEALISM AND REALITY: A STUDY OF THE THEME OF WIDOW REMARRIAGE IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S NOVEL *WATER*

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Abstract

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a Hindu widow had been through a very miserable life. In those days the child marriage was in practice. Young girls in the early teenage were married off, many times, to men much older than their age. The death of their husbands would push girls in the passage of widowhood. Widows lacked common living standards along with any claim on the property. They had to compromise with a despicable way of living. The novel *Water* by Bapsi Sidhwa presents the sad living of widows. The present paper explores the obstacles presented in this novel in the execution of law to protect women. The outward forces like false religious and social standards obstructed justice to women.

Keywords: widow, child marriage, exploitation of widow, sati, failure of widow remarriage

The cruel custom of *sati* in Hindu religion, which forced a widow to sacrifice herself on the funeral pyre of her husband became illegal by the efforts of a social reformer, Raja Ram Mohan Roy. G.R. Madan, a scholar of sociology, points out the hypocrisy in India, particularly in Hindu religion. Sidhwa notices that Hindu worship a woman because of her exemplary qualities of patience, endurance, love, affection, sympathy and generosity but her condition "...became pitiable during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (112). He concludes that a woman in Hindu religion had high status during the early Vedic period. The woman was adored like a goddess and shared equal rights with her husband. The idea of private property snatched a woman's importance. Besides, her physical weakness put her to an inferior position. Her status went to the bottom through Manu's code of Hindu Law. Manu denied the freedom to a woman. He

suggested that a woman is entirely dependent on a man in the form of a father, a husband and a son. G.R. Madan further points to the fact that "Society, having robbed her of individuality, idolised her as 'Sati', a tradition of noble sacrifice. During this period, we also find the evils of prostitution, female infanticide, polygamy, 'kulinism' and early marriages" (113). Hindu widows suffered because of religious and social restrictions. A mere sight of a widow was considered as ominous. She was supposed to have devoured the life of her husband due to her previous life's sins. A widow had to put on a coarse white one-piece sari. She had to sacrifice delicious food to constrain her lust. She had to shear off her hair. Child marriage was prevalent. Parents of girls had to succumb to social and religious pressures. A girl had simply no option but to marry the man of her father's choice. Often the father's concern for dowry would result in an underage girl-

old man marriage. A widow was deprived of any inheritance and sent to widow-ashrams run on charity. Widow remarriage was unacceptable to the high caste Hindus. Young and aspirant woman had to live a widow's life till death. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, a great social reformer of Bengal Renaissance, took it to the task to make widow remarriage possible. It led to some enactments "... Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act, 1856, the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, the Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act, 1937" (113). *Water* (2006) the novel by Bapsi Sidhwa depicts the sad plight of widows. The women in the novel don't get justice. The novelist shows various causes that make women helpless.

The novel *Water* by Bapsi Sidhwa is a reverse example of a novel written on film *Water* by Deepa Mehta and not vice versa. The present novel explores the plight of widows and how she was disregarded in a patriarchal Hindu society. In this novel, the time set is just before Independence. The Act of Law regarding *Sati* was previously passed. The widow remarriage was legally accepted. *Water*, however, presents the problems in bringing the practice of it in reality.

The novel begins with the marriage of *Chuyia* and her dissolution into a child widow. She is the daughter of a poor Brahmin priest, *Somnath*. He marries *Chuyia* with merely six years old *Hira Lal*, a widower of forty-four years old. When she turns eight years old, *Hira Lal* dies. *Chuyia's* entry into the widow ashram is an example of the sad plight of widows in the ashram. We get an insight into the different age groups of widows in the ashram. *Chuyia* is still innocent to understand the meaning of having got married. She doesn't know difficulties in her life as a widow. The legal provision restraining the child marriage gets disregarded in her case. *Chuyia's* father becomes practical. He tells his wife that *Chuyia* is going to marry in a 'noble Brahmin lineage'. (7) *Bhagya* makes feeble efforts to stop him. But *Somnath* convinces her by attracting her attention to Brahminical tradition that a woman 'is recognized as a person only when she is one with her husband'(8). Here, tradition disregards the human aspect of *Chuyia*. According to Godsen and Priscilla "The culture, custom, tradition are [is]

meant to comfort and protect each and every person of the society. But the fake customs stood as a scaffold to the society, especially women" (380-382). *Bhagya* knows what the future awaits *Chuyia* as she meditates:

...in Brahmin culture, once widowed, a woman was deprived of her useful function in society-that of reproducing and fulfilling her duties to her husband. She 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 mortality of the community. (24)

It is *Madhumati*, an old widow who rules the widow house on Dharma ghat. She was born into a wealthy family. Her father had brought up her equal like a son. She was married early and bestowed dowry as if she was a king's daughter. She was married to an old man. He died as he tried to have sex with her on the first night of the wedding. *Madhumati* demanded her right of wealth from her mother-in-law. But she was brutally raped by her two brothers-in-law for a week. Then she was beaten and abandoned in a forest. *Gulabi* and two other eunuchs who were collecting firewood found her in the forest. They take her to the present widow house ruled then by an old widow. *Madhumati* was fourteen years old then. When she is recovered, she is sent for prostitution by the old widow. *Madhumati* and *Shakuntala* both lose their claims on the right of wealth. They face severe troubles and hard life when they try to claim (though not into a court) on their property. *Faiyaz Afreen* comments that Sidhwa presents the widowhood in all the vile aspects. She concludes, "Each character be it *Chuhiya*, *Kalyani*, *Shakuntala*, *Patirajji* (*Bua*) even *Madhumati* face the severe inhuman punishment of society in different facets" (3).

Kalyani is another widow in the ashram. She is beautiful and in her teenage. She could grow her hair long because *Madhumati* sends her to 'clients' with *Gulabi* to landlords in Rawalpur. *Narayan*, a

graduate from Kolkata, falls in love with her and decides to marry her. Kalyani's short existed love gives an insight into the impossible desires of a woman thrown into prostitution. Narayan conveys his decision of marriage with Kalyani to his mother first. As Narayan declares that he wants to marry a widow, his mother reacts "Her (Bhagwati's) head jerked up. She stared at him in horror, and then she covered her face with hands. It couldn't be true" (138). Narayan knows that it would be the same kind of opposition he will have to face. He is also confident that his mother will ultimately accept his decision as he is her only son. He tries to solace her as he says "It is not as terrible as you think, Ma- old ways and ideas have changed. Raja Ram Mohan Roy says widows should get married" (138). Bhagwati knows traditions are strong than social reforms suggested by thinkers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. She is all worried about weddings of the daughters. She tells Narayan that if the tradition overlooked, his sisters may have no suitors. She even threatens of committing suicide. Narayan, nevertheless, is determined. The love story of Narayan and Kalyani ends suddenly and pathetically. Kalyani comes to know that Narayan is the son of Dwarkanath, her client. She tells Narayan the truth. Returning to the ashram is no option since she had taken an unwanted decision. Mahumati not only warned her about the impending danger for crossing religious and social restraints but forcefully locked her in a room. *Shkuntala* rescues Kalayani to make her marriage with Narayan possible. Kalyani sees no other alternative but drowning herself in the Ganga.

The failure of Kalyani's remarriage as a widow is caused mainly because of her exploitation by the false social standards. A mere glimpse of a widow is considered ominous. However, the high-class men in Rawalpur don't mind the sexual exploitation of so-called inauspicious widows. Kalyani refuses to marry Narayan. She does not like to enter the house as a bride. The law of widow remarriage into her case turns out useless in the moral prospect. After the death of Kalyani, Madhumati sends Chuyia to a client. The man exploits Chuyia. Shakuntala rescues her as she hands her over to Narayan as he lives in his house in dismay. The legal provision regarding the widow remarriage in the case of Kalyani is

unsuccessful. The beauty of Kalyani becomes a disadvantage. Faiyaz Afreen makes a vital remark "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" (3-8). Thus bias of gender and widowhood overpowers the women characters in the novel. In the patriarchal society takes disadvantage over the legal provisions in the interest of women. Subarata Halder, research scholar remarks:

In her novel "Water" Bapsi Sidhwa shows with a poke in the eye the cruelties and inhuman practices of Hindu religion against the child widows and also adult widows. Through the age-old custom-"widowhood", this novel tries to unveil the exploitation by the patriarchal society. By exposing this exploitation, she doesn't want to blame any religion i.e. Hinduism. She knows well that no religion is faultless. But she wants to say that whether custom of widowhood is an integral part of the religion or not, but one point is clear that the root reason of exploitation is the misuse of power of the male dominated society especially by the privileged class. (851)

The novel exemplifies difficulties in the implication of law. Only people in power can assert legal rights. The child marriage act becomes useless because of circumstantial impacts. The widows in the novel also find it difficult to exert their property right. They have to bear a threat to lives and have to compromise a very miserable life. Madhumati being herself a woman is shown as exploiting other women. Still, all her decisions emerge out of financial needs.

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