

# Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Water*: A Critique of Patriarchy and Gender Discrimination

Khushi<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Manjari Johri<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Amity School of Languages, Lucknow, UP, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Amity School of Languages, Lucknow, UP, India

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 23 Jun 2024; Received in revised form: 27 Jul 2024; Accepted: 05 Aug 2024; Available online: 11 Aug 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords</b>— <i>widows, identity, water, culture, patriarchy, tradition</i></p>	<p>Bapsi Sidhwa’s <i>Water</i> (2006) is an adaptation of Deepa Mehta’s film of the same title. The Film is the last part of the trilogy named “Elements” which consists of “<i>Fire</i>” (1996), “<i>Earth</i>” (1998) and “<i>Water</i>” (2005). The novel explores the cultural and historical context of the status of women and widows in the pre-independence era of India. This research paper aims to find out how specific customs and practices led to the marginalization of the widows and impacted their lives, compelling them to live in renunciation and suffer sexual exploitation by the males who wielded power. The novel has been examined through the lens of Cultural Studies to shed light on the influence of Hindu religious practices on the lives of the widows. An examination of novel <i>Water</i> provides insights into the status of women and the challenges faced by widows in a patriarchal society. This paper undertakes to study how the plight of women became more deplorable due to the existing cultural practices and to highlight the improvement that can become possible through education and empowerment of women that became possible with the social reforms implemented in India. The article enquired how Bapsi Sidhwa’s <i>Water</i> critiques the cultural and religious practices surrounding widowhood in 1930s India and what it reveals about the intersection of gender, religion, and social reform in colonial Indian society.</p>

Bapsi Sidhwa, a Pakistani American novelist born in 1938, belonged to the Parsi Zoroastrian community. She primarily focuses on topics such as the colonial era in India, the historical events surrounding the Partition, the lives and stories of the Parsi community, and narratives of migrating from South Asia to the United States. She accepted the offer of Deepa Mehta to adapt her film *Water* (2005) into a novel. Sidhwa

stated in one of her interviews that she is grateful to be a part of Deepa’s trilogy. Sidhwa has previously worked with Mehta on another notable project named *Cracking India*(1988). The novel *Cracking India* was adapted into a film named *Earth* in 1998, while *Water* was initially made as a film and then adopted into a novel. Collaboration between Deepa Mehta, a

filmmaker, and Bapsi Sidhwa, a novelist, creates a bridge of art that connects literature and films.

Bapsi Sidhwa, being a women's rights activist, enthusiastically adapted a controversial movie into a novel. She employed satire as a means of critiquing society's treatment of widows, utilizing subtle humor to expose the prevalent stereotypes in India. Sidhwa has contributed a lot to South Asian Literature and Diaspora Literature through her notable works such as *The Pakistani Bride*(1982), *An American Brat*(1993), *Cracking India*(1988), *The Crow Eater*(1982) and *Water*(2006).

## INTRODUCTION

The film *Water* nominated in the category of Best International Feature Film at Academy Awards in 2006, is set in the backdrop of pre-independence in 1938 during the British Raj in Varanasi. Through its medium, Deepa Mehta critiques the societal attitude towards widows and their living conditions through this movie. In the film, widows can "either ... throw herself in the funeral pyre along with the dead husband and die with him which we call *Sati* or she can marry his brother if the family allows and also if one is available" (Mehta,1:21:56) or commit to a life of widowhood that entails renunciation and desolation by shaving off her hair, entering an ashram, wearing white as a sign of keening for the dead husband and leading a life away from worldly pleasures. Mehta and Sidhwa's *Water* underpins the subaltern status of women, who become further marginalized due to their widowhood, compelling them to lead a life of forced renunciation and celibacy, but ironically, it also exposes them to become subjects of exploitation by the patriarchal pundit community.

Deepa Mehta's film offers insights into the cultural and historical aspects of how widows are treated. The movie rigorously examines traditions passed through generations. It tackles topics like child marriage, misogyny, and social exclusion. The film's production encountered significant resistance, especially since it critiques certain Hindu customs. Originally intended to be filmed in Varanasi and its ghats, the sets were demolished by groups of religious extremists. Hindu fundamentalists also staged many protests, alleging that the film's depiction of various issues offends their religious feelings. These hurdles

led to a change of location as it became impossible to shoot in Varanasi. The movie was then shot in Sri Lanka. This magnificent film features talented actors such as Lisa Ray (as Kalyani), Sarala (as Chuiya), Seema Biswas (as Shakuntala) and John Abraham (as Narayan), who brought the characters to life and portray the harsh reality vividly. *Water* accounts for the life led by widows and explores social issues such as patriarchy, sexuality, marriage, orthodoxy and man- woman relationships.

In the opening chapter of the novel *Water* by Bapsi Sidhwa, Sidhwa establishes the identity of women according to Hindu traditions as expected from the society through the father of Chuiya, Somnath, as he states: "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), "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"(ibid.) and "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 is all!" (ibid.)

The text outlines societal beliefs that diminish a woman's value, suggesting that without a man, she lacks an independent identity, and her fulfilment should always involve a man. The term "paraya dhan" reflects this attitude, indicating that a woman is considered an asset belonging to another family, either her own before marriage or her in-laws after. Society's traditional views dictate that a woman's primary purpose is to cater to men in various roles – be it as a daughter, sister, wife, or mother – and to bear children. Furthermore, it is suggested that a woman's significance and identity are further eroded upon her husband's death, as per certain religious customs. One of the most common reasons of widowhood is child marriage. The novel starts with the joyful event of the marriage of an eight year-old child, Chuiya, who is unaware of the meaning of the ritual itself. She is married to an old man in his 40s who dies shortly. Soon, she is stripped off her all symbols that indicate her marital status and bestowed widowhood; even though she has no recollection of her marriage and husband. This can be seen in her conversation with

her father. Chuyia is abandoned in an ashram by her family and in-laws. "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 morality of the community" (Sidhwa,25). Another instance of child marriage is presented when Kalyani confesses to Narayan about not remembering or seeing her husband. It establishes that Kalyani and Chuyia share the same fate of being a child bride and a widow. Both end up becoming preys to notions of widowhood and get violated for financial stability of the ashram.

### Role of Culture

Eliot presents culture as "an organic , shared system of beliefs that cannot be planned or artificially induced" (Eliot,1948). Culture is not a one-dimensional concept but is a mixture of many variables such as languages, identity, religion, social behaviour, customs, art, dress code and so on. Culture is never constant; it keeps on evolving. Cultural studies offer valuable conceptual tools to examine and evaluate a piece of work. I would focus on two important aspects: identity and religion. A cultural reading of *Water* offers significant dimensions through which the reader can gain an understanding of the underlying factors that led to the construction and deconstruction of identity of women when forced into widowhood. Religion also plays a vital role in the lives of widows who were exploited by powerful males on the grounds of religious practices that the latter used to their advantage. Other cultural factors that could be held accountable for the plight of women include the class to which they belonged, their age, location and their level of education .

### Treatment Of Widows

"In an orthodox Hindu society, widow women are forced to get rid of all their desires and comforts in order to maintain a desireless (mokshahin) life after their husband's death" (Dey,2016). Widows were considered inauspicious and were treated like untouchables. Sidhwa presents this through the character of Kalyani, who accidentally touches a married woman. The woman curses Kalyani for polluting her and having to bathe again. "Society

shuns widows as a plague. People believed that touching widow or their shadow can contaminate them with ill luck. Some even performed cleansing rites to avoid such fate" (Purohit and Jayshree Singh,2023).

Widows were not allowed at any auspicious events, such as weddings or child birth. In the novel, *Shakuntala*, despite knowing the fact that she is not welcomed, goes near the group preparing for the wedding. Perhaps she wanted to witness the joy radiating from the bride; perhaps she wished to be among happy people; perhaps she wanted to relive the life before she was bestowed widowhood. The priest spoke sharply to *Shakuntala*, "Watch it! Don't let your shadow touch the bride" (Sidhwa,72). The treatment towards widows is heartbreaking as they are not allowed to share the joys of the world. This cruel treatment is the reason women wish to die before their husbands to avoid the cursed existence imposed by Hindu codes. This can be seen as Sidhwa states: "Wraith-like figures in white saris, their every movement seemed to be an apology for their continued existence" (35). Widows are isolated from society. They are supposed to pay for the sins of past life which is bestowed in the form of widowhood. Sidhwa gives a detailed account of the rigorous practices prevalent in ancient India:

According to the Manusmriti, the foremost Sanskrit text in the orthodox tradition, "a widow's head is shaved, her ornaments removed, and she is expected to remain in perpetual mourning. She is to observe fasts, give up eating "hot" foods in order to cool her sexual energy, avoid auspicious occasions because she is considered inauspicious (for having caused her husband's death), and to remain celibate, devout and loyal to her husband's memory. The later Vriddha Hirata was more explicit. She should give up chewing betel nut, wearing perfumes, flowers, ornaments and dyed clothes, taking food from a vessel of bronze, taking two meals a day, applying collyrium to the eyes; she should wear only a white garment, curb her senses and anger, and sleep on the ground" (Sidhwa,109).

Widows are expected to embody virtues such as purity and an austere life. They were denied the right

of remarriage until 1856. Even much after the laws passed, widows remained unaware of this knowledge. Shakuntala unveils the truth about widow remarriage as she questions her faith in *puranas* (traditional Indian texts). This can be seen through the conversation between Shakuntala and the pandit as she questions him if it is written in Holy Scriptures that women should be treated badly.

“However,” he continued, “a law was recently passed which favours widow remarriage.” “A law?” Shakuntala said, surprised.

“Why don’t we know about it? Shouldn’t we have been told?” Sadananda gave a sardonic, lopsided grin and replied, “We ignore the laws that don’t suit us” (Sidhwa,117).

This conversation shows how society isolates widows from knowledge and basic human rights. Laws regarding widow remarriage allow widows to enter back into the society that once desolate them; such laws make it hard for society to prey on them or exploit them for personal use. So, widows are kept in the dark and are unaware of laws that can save them from both physical and psychological abuse.

According to Dr Sewa Singh Bajwa and Dr Ravinder Dhillon, remains of Hindu bodies get flown away from the waters of the rivers. In a very exact way, the dignity of a woman gets erased away after she becomes a widow and the world around her cohesively blocks all of her humanitarian rights (2022). Widows must get used to the humiliation inflicted on them by the society. Widows have to depend on others for their daily bread without any means of financial aid. The novel describes the widows as “they sat outside the temple in their white saris with their begging bowls ...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. They had long ago lost their initial sense of shame and humiliation at accepting alms” (Sidhwa’74).

However, no equivalent limitations have ever been applied to male widowers. Society has historically turned a blind eye to men’s infidelity while consistently scrutinizing women’s chastity. This

clearly demonstrates that women are constantly required to demonstrate their innocence and purity in a society that prioritizes patriarchal values. Women are marginalized and left voiceless in their fight for their rights.

### **Widows Of Water**

Sidhwa vividly captures the plight of widows in the 1930s in *Water*, illustrating the challenging conditions, societal pressures, and personal losses they endured. Despite significant improvements and legal protections for widows in contemporary times, it's important not to overlook the historical hardships they faced. Sidhwa skillfully depicts various aspects of widowhood through characters like Chuyia, who serves as a catalyst; Shakuntala, who acts as a guardian; Kalyani, who is exploited; and Madhumati, who wields power. “Sidhwa depicts the widow's identity, agency and sexuality to intervene into the religious, cultural and social, political normative discourse within and outside the Ashram. Widows make a home away from home by co-operation, empathy, memories, shared experiences and solidarity” (Bishnoi and Gaur,2019). The treatment also varied among widows according to their previous status even though they are all captive by the very traditional culture of Indian widowhood. Their lost status determined their authority in the ashram and maintained a hierarchy to run the ashram.

### **Chuyia : A Revolutionary Voice**

According to Thomas Caldwell, Chuyia is “a free and rebellious spirit despite the absurdity and unfairness of the situation she is placed in” (2013). Chuyia, the protagonist of the novel, is presented as an outspoken child. She is given the voice to express herself. She questions the orthodox in the disguise of innocence. Chuyia's questions also interrogate the patriarchal and hierarchical relations between widows and widowers in the Indian context. “She nudged Shakuntala and, in a voice that carried innocence , asked, “Didi, where is the house for the men widows?” (Sidhwa,63). Such logic was common but was never enticed in the minds of other widows. They were used to the life and thinking assigned to them by society. They never questioned the discrimination between men and women. Sidhwa uses Chuyia as a tool to bring out such questions in the open. Her name represents her inquisitive nature, although her



character is the opposite of the name she is given. Chuyia, the name, signifies meekness; she is anything but meek. She silently protests against the customs of widowhood. She defies norms as she is unaware of the customs. She runs around even when widows aren't allowed to. She is a catalyst whose arrival brings warmth and change in the ashram. Chuyia, unaware of what marriage and widowhood means, questions the malpractice done on widows in guise of religious texts. Her innocent questions allowed others to raise new thinking that other widows failed to think about. They started to doubt the imposed traditions which condemns them to the life of invisibility.

She revolts against the cruelty done to her. She silently protested by curling her toes as her head was shaven. Another protest was when she bit Madhumati; as Madhumati tried to impose widowhood and the ashram as Chuyia's new home. However, Chuyia, who wanted to return to her house, got used to her new life and lost her hope overtime. Her hope of leaving the ashram was revived with the possibility of remarriage of Kalyani. She thinks that if Kalyani can leave the ashram and retain happiness, then she may also be able to break free from the chains of the ashram. When Madhumati threatened the possibility of her hope and remarriage of the Kalyani, Chuyia killed Mitthu, a beloved parrot of Madhumati, as a protest.

Chuyia is empathetic. Even in a strange environment, she cares for people around her. As rightly stated by Dr. Sewa Singh Bajwa, "The sensitivity of Chuyia even in the ordeal of miserably stricken life strikes a subject of humanitarianism that possess by the small girl like her" (2022). She fed laddoo to bua who long tormented herself by holding onto the only happy memory of her marriage treat. This act of Chuyia helped Bua attain nirvana by fulfilling her wish before death. Chuyia is a turning point in the life of Shakuntala and Kalyani. A wave of change was seen in the ashram due to Chuyia.

### **Hypocrisy Of Widowhood**

Widowhood is a tough path which is believed to lead widows to attain nirvana. Surviving widowhood without any financial resources is challenging. Widows often had to rely on others for their daily sustenance. This dependency made them vulnerable to the mistreatment by those in positions of power.

Their battle is not just with societal norms but also internal conflicts among themselves. Such poverty exposes widows to various forms of exploitation. "On one hand, Madhumati talks about living in purity and dying in purity and about chastity and purity of widows, while on the other hand, she sends Kalyani across the river to perform the act of prostitution in the house of bourgeois truly explores the hypocrisy of Madhumati" (Adhikary,2021). Society expects widows to be pure, virtuous and loyal to their dead husbands but takes advantage of them. Hypocrisy is seen when the widow's head is shaved to not appear attractive whereas Madhumati on the other side allowed Kalyani to grow hair to look appealing to appease bourgeois. Another event that discloses the hypocrisy is when Madhumati, head of the ashram, doesn't give money for Bua's funeral from the fund. Even though Madhumati claims that all widows are sisters who depends on each other and are refugee in ashram yet she pompously misuses the money given by Seth in terms of Kalyani for personal use.

The novel is a critique of religion to gain economic and political power but not the religion itself. Religion is used as a tool to demean women by giving them subordinate positions. Caldwell notes that the film "directly addresses the dangers of religion having too much power and influence to the extent that it can bypass the laws for its own ends. It also exposes how religious beliefs can be hijacked to serve the needs of people in a position of authority" (2013).

### **Identity**

'*Grihalaxami*' is a word used for women in Indian society. It is a controversial term. It may sound like women are the owners of the house, but it actually binds them to chains, denying them to be financially independent, as their task is to serve their husbands and manage the house. But this identity is snatched from them after the demise of their husband. They are pinned for the loss and banished from their own houses. Varanasi, the holy city of life and death, became the home of abandoned widows, giving them a roof over their heads. Widows are forced to accept the malpractice of social codes without question. "Shakuntala had never questioned the belief in the Dharma Shastra that widowhood was the punishment for a sinful existence in the past, and she atoned for it with prayer and the observance of fasts as prescribed"

(Sidhwa,44). However, her belief is shaken when Shakuntala comforts Narayan after the death of Kalyani saying "Why are we widows sent here , there must be a reason for it" , Narayan breaks it down saying : "One less mouth to feed, four saris, one bed to let – somewhere a corner saved for another widow. There is no other reason. Disguised as religion, it's just about money" (Sidhwa,131). Narayan's words shows how widows are labelled as spiritually unclean and economic burden. It dawns on us that the real reason of the abandonment of widows under the veil of religious norms is due to money.

In society, a woman's identity was historically insignificant without association with her husband. This is exemplified in the literary work where Shakuntala identifies herself primarily as a "widow" rather than by her own name. The narrative vividly highlights the erasure of women's individuality, as illustrated by Narayan's friend's commentary: "My father doesn't even bother to learn their names. He just refers to them as the old one, the fat one, the new one, the young one..." (Sidhwa, 58). Society viewed women as vulnerable without the presence of a man, exposing them to various forms of abuse. However, the narrative also illustrates the harsh criticism faced by widows who attempted to rebuild their lives. Their efforts to remarry were seen as a form of betrayal to their deceased spouses and a challenge to long-standing traditions. This critical examination of patriarchal traditions, which are seen as hypocritical and enslaving, is increasingly being contested by progressive thinkers and advocates for women's rights. While there has been significant progress, vestiges of such mistreatment and social stigmas persist in certain areas. To overcome these outdated traditions and social prejudices, there's a pressing need to move away from archaic, morally questionable religious beliefs.

### **Feminist Ideas in *Water***

Beauvoir asserted that women are as capable of choice as men and thus can choose to elevate themselves. However, women have always been considered subordinate sex in a male-dominated society. Even if we trace history, intelligent and well-informed women who had the ability to stand for themselves against patriarchal rules were considered witches and burnt alive. To stop such practices and open opportunities for women, feminism emerged in the

late nineteenth century. "Feminism advocates women's right based on a belief in the equality of the sexes politically and biologically from a women centered point of view and it refuses to accept the cult of masculine Chauvinism and superiority that reduces women to sex object, a second sex, and submissive to the man" (Adhikary,2021). The study of widows also comes under a diverse field of feminist studies. Women are considered an object over which a man proves his authority and dominates her. Jewels and bangles also hold symbolic meaning in Indian customs representing the changed destiny. Women, in Indian tradition, are told to wear jewels after marriage. It may symbolize the chains that control them.

The status of women in society is no more than that of a mute animal. For example, women are obliged to follow the hierarchical social systems where they cannot find their respectable position. "The society keeps them aloof from social matters like decision making , participating in political matters , problem solving , social and familiar discussions and in financial issues . She even does not have right to make her own decision as she is deprived by tradition" (Adhikary,2021). Women come across such obstacles very often. However now women have equal access to resources and can take their own decisions. This positive effect helps in evolving the society for better.

### **Deepa Mehta's *Water***

Deepa Mehta uses the film to represent larger issues about how religion is misused by people in position of power to deny human rights. In one of her interviews, Deepa stated that "Water" profoundly emphasizes the detrimental effects of misinterpreting religion on women. Her use of cinematography and colours creates a deeper impact on audience to express hidden meanings. "In the context of the film, white is both the colour of mourning and traditional notions of purity. This makes it a particular oppressive colour since widows do live a death like existence due to religious instructions to remain chaste out of respect for their deceased husband" (Caldwell,2013). *Water* draws its title potentially because it is set in Varanasi, alongside the sacred Ganges River, reflecting the static phase in the lives of widows. The Ganges also symbolizes the cycle of life and death, the ongoing tradition of early marriages leading to young widows, and life's

persistence. Similarly, its ghats are depicted as a representation of life's cyclical nature. The colour blue is used throughout the narrative to denote liberty and serenity. Deepa Mehta has infused the narrative with colours that signify their distinct meanings, enhancing the story. The movie delves into the dynamics of power within Indian society, highlighting discrimination based on religion, gender, and social status.

## CONCLUSION

Both the novel and the film, *Water* question the fundamental rights that the widows have been deprived of. It criticizes the dehumanizing treatment of women. The novel beautifully presents the rigidity of widowhood and its inhumane impact on widows. To stop such ill practices and ostracism of widows, it is necessary for traditions to keep advancing with time and not be inflexible, like stagnant water. Social Reforms envisioned by leaders like Raja Rammohan Roy led to the institutionalization of the Widow Remarriage Act (1856) led to the alleviation of the widows. Subsequently, the right to education and the Hindu Succession Act (1956) allowed women to seek education and claim an equal share in their husband's property. Sidhwa and Mehta's artistic presentation raises pertinent issues regarding women's identity, with and without their husbands, and provokes the readers and the viewers to have a sympathetic view of their marginalized state. At the same time, they also weave a story that narrates a tale of women's empowerment, solidarity and resilience – making *Water* as memorable as the other two parts of the trilogy, *Fire* and *Earth*.

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