

Impressions of Pre-Independence and tumultuous India in Bapsi Sidhwa's Water

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Abstract- Literature is a reflection of life. Literature aims to present delight and instruction to the readers. Novel as a tale of love and adventure, had its origin in medieval romance. Bapsi Sidhwa is an award winning internationally acclaimed Pakistani writer. The novels of Bapsi Sidhwa reflect the evils faced by the common people especially women due to the popular cultures, beliefs and traditions. The trauma from the basis of partition of India is explained to a great extent by Bapsi Sidhwa. This paper endeavours to show the helpless condition of women especially the widows in the Indian society. Bapsi Sidhwa portrays the discrimination that existed between the Hindu society and the peculiar harsh treatment of women in her novel Water. The social clashes that existed within the society and the dragging of widowed women towards prostitution are widely analysed and explained in this paper. Finally the paper is concluded with the findings that nothing exists forever and a victim cannot be a victim always.

There was a drastic change in the texture and style of the Pakistani writers in their writings soon after the independence. The negative views on independence and the negative events which took place during the independence are marked as the major themes in their writings. Writers like Shahid Suhrawardy, Ahmed Ali, Alagmir Hashmi, Tautiq Rafat, Davd Kamal, Maki Kureishi introduced new trends in Pakistani English Literature. Bapsi Sidhwa, Hanif Kureshi, Tariq Ali, Aamer Hussein and Sara Suleri hold a prominent place in Pakistani English Literature. The literary minds of the Women writers especially in the Asian continent were ignited by the Feminist Movement of 1960. Bapsi Sidhwa designs her novel to be the revelation of Women and their struggles in the Society. Her Women protagonists mainly serve as victims at first and as revolutionaries against their male counterpart.

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel Water is written in the background of feminist discourse in the time of Partition. The Novel is based on Deepa Mehta's film Water which was banned to be broadcasted inside the country due to the wide exposure of the controversial Hindu customs in India. Bapsi Sidhwa the award Winning Novelist of Parsi-Zoroastrian background produced a full fledged novel based on this film which carries the life of Hindu Widows and their culture as the plot and 1930 Varanasi as the venue of action. Women are represented as ignorant, poor uneducated and silent captives of Sexual freedom. The conceptions of traditions, prediction of culture and predicament of the patriarchal society and the adverse effects faced by women serve as the major issue in Sidhwa's novels.

The Novel begins with a six year carefree innocent girl named Chuyia, and her marriage with a 44 year old man Hiralal. As Chuyia has not attained puberty she was allowed to be in her father's house. In the mean time Hiralal faces death due to his poor health and Chuyia was thrown into the Widows ashram without even knowing the real meaning of 'Widowhood'. In the Widow house she was accompanied by other widows like Madhumati, Bua, Sakuntala, Kalyani, Gulabi and other inmates. Chuyia adapts to the new situation and started to lead her life in a happy way. Meanwhile, Kalyani was dragged into prostitution just to satisfy the bellies of her inmates. Kalyani soon falls in love with Narayan, a young follower of Gandhi and decides to be with him till the end of her life. With the concern of the senior widow Sakuntala, Kalyani moves out with Narayan to his hometown. But unfortunately she comes to know of the harsh reality that she had been mistress to Narayan's father and she drowns to death. Later, Chuyia was dragged into prostitution and she was saved by Sakuntala. Narayan was made as the guardian of Chuyia and was taken away from Varanasi.

In Water Bapsi Sidhwa portrays the social evils that were cast on women especially before the Independence of the country. There were major discrimination on the basis of castes like the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras. When the first three were treated respectable in the society the Sudras were considered as untouchables. Though there was a wide distinction in caste system women of all castes were treated equally. They were not allowed to enjoy the privileges of the society and were oppressed by men which resulted in the suppression of their feelings. Brahmins

were considered as the foremost respectable class of the society. But there was a distinction in the respect of Brahmin men and women. Women were not allowed to suggest their ideas even to their husbands. The wishes and desires of women were not given importance. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* carries such an incident in which Somnath refuses to hear the words of his wife on his 6 year old daughter Chuyia's marriage which resulted in the banishment of Chuyia from the happy world.

The book is set in 1938 against the backdrop of Mahatma Gandhi's rise to popularity. Child Marriage was a common practice during those times. When the husband of the girl child faces death she was either forced to burn with her husband or sent to Widow Ashram or made to marry her husband's younger brother. Though widow remarriages were legalized those times they were considered only as mere taboos. The novel *Water* throws light upon the evil customs in India before partition. The harsh customs include Gender bias, treatment of widows as inauspicious human beings, Superstitions on widows, Strict prohibition of the entry of Widows into the marriage houses.

The shocking customs of Hindu society and the inhumane treatment of the widows in the society though they belong to the respectable Brahmin class were beautifully depicted by Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *Water*. Chuyia's marriage ceremony takes place at a Brahmins temple. Hiralal applies red sindoor in the forehead of Chuyia. She was decorated with ornaments and wedding saree. After two years of marriage Hiralal falls ill and faces death. Chuyia's father Somnath reveals to Chuyia "your husband is dead you are a widow now". (1). Chuyia with a puzzling tone questions him, back stating "For how long, Baba?" (2). Chuyia's mother-in-law took her to the pyre takes off her mangalasutra and breaks her red bangles. Chuyia remains as a mere observer and not even understands what is happening to her she adapts to the situation and stands mute. "Suddenly, her mother-in-law loomed over Chuyia and, before Chuyia had time to react, she jerked the mangal-sutra off her neck and the beads scattered on the ground. She grasped Chuyia's hand and using a brick violently smashed the red glass bangles hung from her wrist. (3)

Customs and the culture governed the society. In spite of the passing of time the customs and traditions were framed according to their needs. The culture, custom, tradition are meant to comfort and protect each and every person of the society. But the fake customs framed stood as a Scaffold to the society especially women. "It was enforced by the belief that if the widow did not shave her head, every drop of water that fell upon the hair polluted the husband's soul as many times as the number of hairs upon her head." (4). Chuyia was

forced to shave her head, the widows of the ashram were also left as shaved head. Kalyani was allowed to grow her hair to satisfy men and to fill their bellies. The hair of Kalyani is trimmed as a symbol of punishment for her relationship with Narayan. Madhumati, the leader of the Widows ashram teaches the child widows that "And when our husbands die, God help us, the wives also half die. So how can a poor half-dead woman feel any pain?" (5). The death of her husband is considered as her fault as a result of her sins she has to shave her head, a sign of her widowhood, shun hot food and sweats, clothe themselves in plain white saree without blouse as a punishment. In the Pre Independence India of 1930 even the child widows were kept away from the society and were shunned by their families. They were restricted to be a part of weddings and child birth. They were treated as ill omen in auspicious occasions. On festival days, they get alms by temple-goers, and on regular days, they were given a cup of rice and a fistful of lentils for every eight hours of singing and dancing in the temple. For many widows, this was the only means of sustenance.

Chuyia befriends beautiful young Kalyani. She was forced into prostitution and was sold to local Brahmins and high caste gentry. Widows who were prostitutes were not forced to shave their heads in spite of the reason that the attractive personality of widows would bring out additional income to their quarters. Kalyani was also a victim of it. When Chuyia reveals Kalyani's secret affair with Narayan innocently, Madhumati locks Kalyani and sheers her long black hair. The tension and the desire of Widows out of the solitary confinement is revealed through the questions of Sakuntala to Panditji "You have studied all the Holy Scriptures...I have great respect for your learning...Panditji, is it written that widows should be treated badly?" (8). It is through Panditji Sakuntala hears "However," he continued, a law has recently been passed which favours widow re-marriage. law? (10) "A law?" Shakuntala said, surprised. "Why don't we know about it?" (11) Shakuntala responds. Sadananda's concern deepens. "We ignore the laws that don't suit us." (12).

To satisfy the needs of the inmates after Kalyani's drowning Chuyia was dragged to prostitution. She was sent to one of the clients as a replacement to Kalyani. Unbearable of this injustice to Chuyia Sakuntala revolts against it and finds a new way in the new awakening and new ideas. Sakuntala runs after the train looks at Narayan and finally hands over Chuyia to him to save her from the horrors of Ashram and widowhood.

Bapsi Sidhwa depicts the double strand of the society in her novel *Water*. She describes the brutality and animal treatment of women in the society. To quote, William Shakespeare says "We know what we are but know not what we may be", Bapsi

Sidhwa brings out a valuable concept to the society that nobody can always be a victim. When the victims revolt against the social injustices pressed on them victims are no longer victimizers.

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