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## Gender Discrimination: An Assessment of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water*

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**Abstract :** Gender is the most rapid and profound social change in the twentieth century. The patriarchy is not a new concept but dates back to seven thousand years ago in agrarian and newly emerged states with male chauvinism. Men possess legal powers over his children and wife. This legitimacy of patriarchy was always taken for-granted by the society and believed it a religious doctrine. While other Gender inequalities continue to exist in the different contexts of cultural norms, political and social and institutionalized rules. Male domination has not ended but its foundations are somehow crumbling and falling. Bapsi Sidhwa has expressed this theme of gender discrimination in most of her novels as a Gender class. Sidhwa has realistically expressed the Gender discrimination in her novels with the stories of women sufferings that come to life with these tales.

**Key Notes:** Gender, Discrimination, institutionalized, deliberation, marginalized.

**Introduction:** The construction of self or an identity in the society requires a great philosophical and literary deliberation. It is very important and essential to enquire philosophically about ones identity and self. Woman has not been given a place in the society from many centuries by denying their privileges and rights. This has been resulted in the failure of their own individual development leading to the lack of responsibility in most cultures. The women have been treated as sexual class of oppression whose voices have been muted. This oppressed class remains subjugated and marginalized due to the Gender discrimination by the patriarchal construction of high and low and inferiority and superiority. In a patriarchal society the sufferings of women becomes real rather than metaphysical. They are considered as second sex and had to serve under the imposition of man. This unending oppression by the male dominant society makes them weak and they refrain

themselves from coming out in open conflict with the society. Gloves and Kaplan quotes about Gender that it is “a busy term” (9).

Woman plays a different role in her life, sometimes she is a daughter, sometimes a sister then a wife and finally a mother, a blessing bestowed by Almighty to all the human beings. The male dominant chauvinism has always treated women as a sex toy for pleasure. Woman has been leading a life full of misfortunes, frustrations and stress. They have to follow a set of rules created by the males in order to make them physically, emotionally and intellectually a slave. The woman has to unquestionably accept this sweet poison framed by the males in order to accommodate her in the society. The Gender inequality is a serious crime portrayed by Sidhwa through the reflections of the widows challenging for the survival of the women. Women were considered as a property of males and have no right to rule over their own bodies and lives. Sidhwa challenges the east west encounter of women and their dominant attitudes. Man forcibly challenges the troubled woman and become thrilled by conquering her while as the troubled woman took all the pain in herself even unsupported by her Gender. Judith Butler believes that the Gender is constructed by various social practices and institutions. She clarifies in her book *Bodies that Matter* (1993), that the cultural performances assemble “originally materiality” (10) of sexuality. Her theory delineates with the idea of sex/gender brought by the middle class shades. This quote clarifies the fact that Gender has been brought by various confrontations at social level. Butler makes an impressive remark when she quotes that “the act that one does, the act that one performs, in a sense, an act that has been going on before and arrived on the scene” (3). The sentence the act has been going on is basic answer by the Butler’s theory. He further says that “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (43,44). Butler clearly wants to clarify that a male child is always prioritized than a female child. Roger Jafery and Alik M Basu in their book “*Girls Schooling Woman’s Autonomy and Fertility in south Asia*” 1996 quotes that “Experimental studies have shown that adults respond differently to an infant depending on whether they are told it is a “girl” or a “boy”. They offer the child what they think are gender-appropriate toys and are gentler with “girls” and are more likely to rough-house with “boys” (186).

In this manner even the educated parents inadvertently create a crop of dominating males and timid females. They “teach” their girls to play with dolls where as boys to play with toy guns etc. Here it is clearly understood that the impressions of society and the mind set of an educated person imprints and strengthens the concept of gender discrimination. Parents expect their sons to take care of their daughters and shoulder the responsibilities of the family. Alaka Basu and Roger Jeffery in their book “*Girls’ Schooling women’s Autonomy and Fertility*” (1996) delineate, “The family is a prime site for the maintenance of gender differences.....in ... most households; women do most of the daily cooking, cleaning and laundry. Men’s jobs around the house are usually outdoor work repairs and car maintenance, keeping your house neat, dressing your children in clean clothes.(185)

Thus, family and environs are sole responsible for building the gender inequalities. Bapsi Sidhwa through her literature wants to highlight the issue in order to eradicate this concept that women is meek and weak character in the society and could not be able to compete with the men. Sidhwa wants to highlight this mindset of male domination that has chained the women in the four walled prison. The Novel *Water* depicts the plight of women, sexual harassment and female segregation. The novel has generated attention of the readers in dealing with the gender discrimination by highlight the oppression of women, rapes and sexuality of the female characters in Hindu society. *Water* has been acclaimed as a genuine social farce highlighting the plight of women and expressing her thoughts pathetically in order to catch the attention of the reader.

Gender Discrimination is dominant in her fifth novel *water* (2006) scripted from Deepa Mehta’s movie of the same title. This work of Sidhwa delves deep into the marginalization and brutality perpetrated upon a specific class of women in the Hindu society. Women oppression and resistance against it has been highlighted in a large number of feminist literary creations throughout the world. The issue of the Hindu widows and their pitiable condition by a writer, who is apparently foreign to the Hindu rituals and cultural norms, is unique and expressed painfully. Sidhwa’s *Water* is an everlasting criticism of the Hindu customs and traditions backed and guided by patriarchal imperatives that over the ages in the name of religion. The present age of scientific and technological advancement boasts of advocating transnational flows of humanitarian values and intercultural adaptation. But the age-old traditional values personified in the forms of dominating rules, like patriarchy, restrain the society to move forward and abandon these ill concepts. Men enjoy an advantageous position and

unquestionable authority; women are treated as slaves to men. The society, which is guided by the rules of patriarchy, not only mutes the female voice, but also uses the female consciousness with the sexist ideology. Patriarchy is a social evil which promotes women inferior ideology and consequently constructs the binaries of Centre and Margin to project the distinction between the governing and the governed. The Hindu Brahmin society is no exception in treating women as instruments for providing service and recreation to men. Woman is treated as an instrument for procreation. In the Indian context, the patriarchal system not only works through coercive measures in the forms of rape, domestic violence or incestuous relationship but also spreads through indoctrination of women themselves as to the forms of patriarchy. This commission of the power to female agents is wrongly termed as matriarchy and considered as a balancing anti-thesis to Patriarchy.

The novel highlights the miserable condition of the widows in the Hindu Brahmanical society analysing and expressing the sentiments of widows of the ashram. The novel is not only a historical overview of the conditions of the widows in the Indian social context but a serious introspection changing the rules, customs and norms against the women folk in the society. The whole issue of widowhood has been presented through the stories of three widows namely Chuyia, Kilyani and Shakuntala. Chuyia, an innocent girl of eight years, was married to Hira Lal, an aged man of forty four, who died after some days of the marriage. The narrator of the novel is omniscient who presented the whole story in the context of that little girl's struggle against the pangs of widowhood. The story deals with the life of a little girl, Chuyia, who has to obey the rituals and customs framed by the males after the death of her aged husband. She is dropped in the widow's ashram by her father Somnath, and faces the injustice perpetrated upon the widows by the religious institutions, social customs to accept them as their destiny. Chuyia protests and challenges the patriarchal dominations as a little girl and refuses to be indoctrinated by any tradition. A young and innocent girl, not much experienced in the ways of life, is more likely to see wreath of injustice as a victim of gender inequality. A child character is naturally more prone to hardships and protests against the notions and practices. It is thus an intelligent move on the part of Sidhwa to introduce a young character who can ask questions without fear, stress and anxiety.

Kalyani, another beautiful lady in the ashram was also married at the age of six to a man of sixty years old. After her husband's death she too was sent to the widow ashram. But the character of Kalyani is introduced to expose the double standard of the society. The ashram exploits Kalyani's age and beauty by

compelling her to act as a prostitute to the rich donors of the ashram. The Hindu society has no reservations against the sexuality of the widows in such contexts. The prostitution is allowed when the rich donors satisfy their lust. But in the sexual process the Ashram which is sacred and segregated space for the widows to live a perfect life, becomes a ready storehouse of carnal pleasures where sex is allowed to the high class society.

The female sexuality in the social market is brought out through the stories of the three widows of different age groups present a range of social injustices inflicted upon the widows in the Hindu society and the double standard maintained by patriarchy in the name of norms, customs, rituals and cultural practices.

The socio-cultural and religious rules deny the interpersonal relationship between the man and the wife and consider the institution of marriage as a sacred social custom. But here the woman is treated as a sex toy, which is transferred from one man to another and appropriated by the latter through certain customs and rituals. The author poignantly suggests that the customs of “Sindoor daan” and “Kanya daan” are the inhuman practices of treating a woman as an object to be appropriated.

Sidhwa, being a Parsi, is not much familiar with the Hindu customs and cultural practices. The delineation of the customs of Kanya daan and Sindoor daan is the result of an artist’s analysis of cross-religious and cross-cultural customs and rituals. Sidhwa depicts the custom of Kanya daan as the price of the female body, its ownership and transference of ownership. The Sindoor daan, on the other hand, is the ritual of accept the transference and ritual of the right of ownership. The Sindoor with its loud red color appears as a signature of the ownership propagated by the Hindu ideology, which considers women as an object to be appropriated or gifted.

Chuyia in no time faces another grim reality when her husband expires and she becomes a widow. A widow in the Hindu society is not even treated as a normal human being but merely a threat, a curse to the family. She should renounce her all earthly pleasures by restricting herself from wearing jewellery and is not allowed to wear the symbolic marks of married status like the “Mangal sutra” “Sankha” (conch bangles) etc. She will cut off her hair or shave her head. Their diet is also controlled by the society. A widow is not supposed to have fish, eggs or meat and vegetables like onion, garlic, and some pulses are impure food for them. They are not allowed to eat bakery products as those food items are usually produced by the Muslims. She will fast most of the days and have meagre meals at the end of the day. The society does not approve the

widow as a human being, but a creature, whose existence and worth in the society is not only irrelevant but also dangerous. Sidhwa writes:

...in Brahmin culture, once widowed, a woman is deprived of her useful functions in the 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 morality of the community. (*Water* 24)

Kalyani Dutta in her book on Bengali widows *Pinjare Bashiya (Inside the Cage)* (1996) talks of Sibomohini Devi, [I have a wish to feed the widows who have no space and identity in any Hindu rituals. We feed the cows, the crows, the jackals, even the trees, but the widows are still fuming with hunger. Sibomohini Devi's unfulfilled wish is another realistic proof of the painful conditions of the widows.]

However, the entry of Chuyia into the constricted space of widowhood is shown vividly in *Water* by Sidhwa. The transformation of her social condition is accompanied by certain rights and rituals, "Chuyia stood naked as the day she was born, staring at the vibrant little red-and-blue heap her clothes made...The women steered her beneath a tap, and with their rough hands bathed her quickly and dried her with her discarded clothes (*Water*, 33). The cultural discriminated rules make the life of the widows very miserable and painful. Her identity as an unmarried daughter, a married woman, and then a widow is an evidence to the patriarchal control over the female body and its power to determine a woman's social position in a secularist society. At every stage, she has to obey the social norms and the male gaze defies her identity at every stage of her life. The absence of a male controlling agent in the life of a woman removes her to a neglected space. A woman, through the pressures of patriarchy can never be independent enough to live her life in her own terms. Sidhwa foregrounds this question in *Water*. Pitted against the patriarchal pressures, Chuyia refuses to become a, "stupid widow" (36).

She starts defying the norms of widowhood even after she was sent to the ashram at Rawalpur, bald headed and dressed in white sari, living a secluded and pristine life. The basic challenge to the norms of widowhood is posed by Chuyia at the moment of her entry into the inhuman custom. When her father says that



“Your husband is dead...You are a widow now” (29). Chuyia asks, “For how long, Baba?” (29). Such questioning and challenging by an innocent little girl in the novel make her a unique to portray the female voice. Chuyia is innocent and it enables her to pose the most candid and effective challenges. She tries to break down and save herself from the hegemonic matrix with her innocent questionings. A grown up woman like Madhumati, the Head of the widow ashram is a person already immersed in the Hindu value system. She reads out from the Holy Scriptures about the painless lives of the widow “A wife is part of her husband while he is alive... And when our husbands die, God help us, the wives also half die...So, how can a poor half-dead woman feel any pain?” (42).

There was a stunned silence. Then pandemonium broke out. A chorus of scolding erupted from the shocked widows: “Good God!” “What a horrible thing to say!” “God protect our men from such a fate!” “May your tongue burn!” “Pull out her tongue and throw it in the river.” “I’ll do it!” they shrieked like harpies.(63)

Chuyia is abused and cursed not by men, but by the female widows of the ashram. Here, another chance for erection of female solidarity is lost. The widow ashram is the place where the widows share their pains and console each other. Though it is a patriarchal platform, it could have become a wonderful destination for protest, particularly when Chuyia is leading on a front with her innocence and has ignited a burning issue in order to resolve it. But the women act to the contrary. “Pulling out the tongue” clarifies a wish for complete silence. They thus become the victim to the gendered design.

Conclusion:- *Water* describes the painful marginalization and subjugation of the Hindu widows chained in the ashram. They along with Chuyia express their painful and pathetic in the ashram. This description of the widows in the ashram very poignantly focuses on the physical pains, mental stresses and emotional tortures that a women faces. Bapsi Sidhwa being a social activist highlights the minutest desires and wishes of a marginalized widow at the corner of the ashram. These widow characters put a negative impression upon Chuyia to understand her position as a widow. She becomes mature and fully aware of her identity and status in the social customs as a widow when she spends some time with the inmates of the ashram. Chuyia’s contact with her biological mother, Bhagya, is already severed. On the other hand, she is reared by a new mother Shakuntala, who not only saves her from the clutches of the heartless customs but introduces her with Gandhi

and his vision of Truth and Ahimsa. This bonding is beyond the barrier of the family. Bapsi Sidhwa shows the way for an affiliative bonding through the formation of a maternal agency which offers an exclusive Third World feminist agency to utilize female solidarity that is deeply grounded in the Indian socio-cultural contexts and history.

The destructive and oppressive social norms and rules don't allow women any independent liberty and mute the voices of women. Bapsi Sidhwa highlights the plight and pangs of women who are forced to obey the rules that curb their freedom and defile their existence in the society. Bapsi Sidhwa clearly expresses that gender divides the human beings in which the women gets victimized and tortured. It is a conflict between tradition and modernity; a barrier created by the male minds in order to suppress the women folk. She criticizes the Hindu culture for framing strict and inhuman rules for the widows in *Water*. Her motive in all her novels always remains to establish equal men-women relationships by showing that women are tender and reasonable. So it is right to say that [There is a color by the existence of women in the universe. Due to her melody there is music in the universe".]

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