



Tenacity Disrupted: New Paradigms

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Abstract:

Bapsi Sidhwa, a Parsi Pakistani writer in her novel *Water* investigates the elements of realism. The theme of the novel is controversial and complex as it throws light on the age old traditions that victimize women. It is about the perplexity of widows in 1930s in India. The consequences of widowhood are brought forward through the stories of five widows: Chuyia, Kalyani, Shakuntala, Madhumati and the character of Bua, another widow. Sidhwa exposes the cruelties in the name of Hinduism against widows and how they were made to live in the widow houses. Every religion has its flaws; we cannot say that any particular religion is perfect. Hinduism is also incorporated with its negative wherein in the name of religion the injustice is carried out against women.

Keywords: Bapsi Sidhwa, *Water*, consequences of widowhood, Chuyia, Kalyani, Shakuntala, Madhumati and Bua.

Bapsi Sidhwa, a Parsi Pakistani writer in her novel *Water* investigates the elements of realism. The theme of the novel is controversial and complex as it throws light on the age old traditions that victimize women. It is about the perplexity of widows in 1930s in India. In the entire novel, Sidhwa exposes the cruelties in the name of Hinduism against widows and how they were made to live in the widow houses. This novel throws light on exploitation of widows by rich Brahmins. Every religion has its flaws; we cannot say that any

particular religion is perfect. Hinduism is also incorporated with its negative wherein in the name of religion the injustice is carried out against women. The game of power is played with them. In this power game they are dominated, abused and brutally injured. The male treats the female without any respect towards her. The consequences of widowhood are brought forward through the stories of five widows: Chuyia, a child widow who brings life into the ashram; Kalyani, a beautiful young widow, who falls in love with a reformist law student Narayan, Shakuntala, a devout believes in the traditions who struggle to make sense of the realities that surround her and Madhumati, who is the head of the ashram and the character of Bua, another widow, who is from the landowner's family, is thrown out of the house at the age of thirty- five, when her husband dies.

The story begins with Chuyia, a six year old girl who lives with her parents in a village in the Bihar Bengal border. Right from the beginning of the novel Sidhwa tries to be a realistic novelist. At the age of six, she has a happy-go-lucky life where she wanders in the woods and searches gooseberries and leeches. Her carefree life suddenly changes when she is married to Harilal, a 44 year old rich and aged widower. In the modern century it's hard to accept this, but this used to happen few decades back. These mismatched marriages are not new to the people, that is why people take it very normally. As in the society men has the power of decision –making reflecting the patriarchal dominance and it is also evident when Bhagya learns about the match of Chuyia with Hira Lal, in the hurted tone she says submissively, “it will be as you say-you are her father” (*Water:9*). After the marriage, as per the tradition, wedded pre- pubescent Chuyia continues to stay with her parents. As the news of her husband's death reaches to Somnath, Chuyia is taken on a bullockcart carrying her dying husband, accompanied by her father and mother-in-law. She has to accompany his dead body to Varanasi, where he will be cremated at the Holy Ghats. After the cremation, like other widows she is expected to live in a widow's ashram. After the cremation at the ghats in Rewalpur, she is stripped of marriage markers, her red and green bangles and mangalsutra and is draped in a coarse homespun white cloth. Sidhwa narrates:

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 that hung from her wrist...she took the other hand and with the brick smashed the bangles on her other wrist. Chuyia, struck speechless, looked at her shattered bangles in dismay. She searched her mother-in-law’s face with astonished, questioning eyes. (*Water:41*)

Chuyia was informed that, “she no longer exists as a person – all because of the sudden death of a husband she had barely even met”(*Water:32*). Chuyia was not able to understand why she was left at the doorstep of a strange place (ashram) by her own father. When Chuyia’s father tells her, “You are a widow now” (*Water:32*). She asks “For how long, Baba?” (*Water:32*). We cannot expect a girl of eight years who is just not aware of marriage, to accept the widowhood. Ashram was a place where she was supposed to live in repentance till her death. Here the author observes how Chuyia’s father reverts helplessly to the harsh reality of sending his daughter to a widow colony (vidhwa ashram), this proves that every human being is a victim of the violence and inhuman practice of widowhood. The cruelty of Chuyia’s descent into her enforced widowhood is powerfully depicted by the author:

Somnath came and sat on the stone step below Chuyia... his face held the cumulative sorrow of all fathers who had watched their young daughters go through this agonizing ritual. 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. (*Water:43*)

Chuyia in the new role of a widow is not allowed to touch non-widows. Her shadow is considered as “polluted”, so it should not fall on anyone. The belief of the Hindus that widowhood was the direct consequence of a sinful past life, expected all the widows including Chuyia to spend most of her time inside the ashram, praying or fasting in atonement for whatever sins caused her husband’s deaths. Eight year old Chuyia has to spend her entire life in the ashram as widows were not allowed to remarry. Her innocent question, “Where is the house for the men widows?” (*Water:81*) This indicates the dual standards of the society. The Brahmanical tradition in the Stri-dharni says, “A widow has two options: She can commit sati

and mount her husband's pyre, or lead a life of self-denial and pray for her husband's soul. In some cases, if the family allows it. She may marry her dead husband's brother" (*Water*:184). The novel exposes the hypocrisy of the society as the same thing was not applied to the widowers. The widows were not allowed to marry whereas the widower could keep mistress, was allowed to marry and even visit prostitutes.

Realism is also illustrated from the example of Madhumati. Madhumati, a fifty years old widow, is the ruler of the dilapidated ashram. She was brought to the ashram by Gulabi in a very traumatic condition. She was raped, when she became a widow. In such a pathetic condition she was saved by Gulabi. These sufferings made her a hard hearted woman who is cruel towards her own sex. The complete change in the personality of Madhumati suggests that life was not so simple for widows. As a widow, she had asked her in-laws for her share in her husband's property, in return, she is raped by her brothers-in-law and was thrown in the jungle. When she was brought in the ashram her physical and mental condition is not good. The head of the ashram helped her to recover. And after her recovery she was dragged into prostitution by sending her to a client. When she becomes the head of the ashram she continues with the tradition and sends Kalyani to the clients. This shows the attitude of the women. The women only become the enemy of the women. Love and affection which is deprived to the widows of the ashram is shown to Mitthu, her parrot. The point to note here is that even a parrot is respected more than a woman.

The ashram follows the rules and regulations of the patriarchal society given in the holy texts. Most of these holy texts are written by men and as the holy texts say, "A wife is a part of her husband while he's 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?" (*Water*:42). So a widow is called as a "half-dead woman" who cannot feel any "pain" by the other members of the society. It is reflected in the behavior of Madhumati, as when Bua dies, she is least bothered, "The widows [are] weeping, heads bowed. Madhumati [sits] in her chair indifferently fanning herself" (*Water*:112). She sits unaffected by the dead body of Bua and does not even care to give a rupee for her cremation ceremony. The life has eliminated all the soft feelings within her as she herself admits that "my heart has become hard" (*Water*:69).

The third example taken into consideration is of Shakuntala. With the description of her character we get an insight into the social conditions of the widows, their plight and sufferings. Shakuntala, after her marriage to a young widower, is a target of her mother-in-law. She fails to fulfill the basic requirement of marriage i.e. “reproducing sons”. If a daughter-in-law is barren, all the eyes are on daughter-in-laws but no one questions sons on their impotence. When she reaches the age of thirty her husband expires leaving Shakuntala without any role to perform (that of wife and producer of sons). She is not only eyed as responsible for her husband’s death but also as a threat to her husband’s family. As a widow she also comes to the ashram. These widows are not considered to be fit in the society. They are now a symbol of bad omen. Shakuntala is stopped by the priest when she goes near to the wedding place and sent away from the scenario. On another occasion, when Kalyani and Chuyia go after the puppy and pass by the shops, the customer remarks, “they shouldn’t allow widows to run around like this. They bring bad luck to our business” (*Water*:60).

Begging and starvation – the two most predominant characteristics are also reflected as a part of realism. The character of Bua, another widow, who is from the landowner’s family, is thrown out of the house at the age of thirty-five, when her husband dies. Even at the age of seventy, she has to sing for a cup of rice. The inhuman practice of giving one meal a day to the widows was there, to make the matter worse, just to collect a cup of rice and a fistful of lentils they have to sing Lord Krishna and Radha’s names during every eight-hour session of singing and dancing. Sidhwa sharply traces the history of those days, when a widow has to undergo starvation if she was too sick to perform. To fulfil Bua’s prolonged desire for *laddoo*, Chuyia purchases it and sets it near her nose on the mat while she is sleeping. This *laddoo* episode strongly exhibits that widows understand their agonizing condition, and thus tries to fulfill the wishes of one another. It can be assumed that Bua was waiting to achieve her dream and desire of eating laddoo. And with the fulfillment of her desire she dies. The way a widow has been craving for a laddoo clearly shows the widow’s shabby and heart-rendering conditions. The widows often do not receive proper cremation. Since Bua has not saved anything, Madhumati after searching the bundle of ragged clothes of Bua, says she has no money for the cremation of Bua. Kalyani removes the few coins secretly tied in the knot of her sari, and says to Shakuntala, “Didi, I was saving these for my cremation” (*Water*:113). Such scenes bring tears in the eyes of the readers.

Even though she came from a family of landowners, Bua's death raises questions. The family members had hounded her out of her house when her husband died. The fate of Bua compels Chuyia and Shakuntala to think about their future:

Bua had been widowed when she was about thirty-five. She had sung her lungs out till she was seventy. What for? A cup of rice and an occasional cowrie flung at her? An old woman, who had once been young like her. And when she herself was an old crone, a younger widow would look at her and think, *Someday, I too will be and old crone like her and I will die unmourned.* (Water:120-21)

The question of survival of the widows is described through the character of Kalyani. Kalyani, a beautiful looking girl of six, is married off to the highest bidder, a man of sixty. After her husband's death as per the tradition her head is shaved. When she arrives in the ashram Madhumati favors her for growing hairs back because she wants to force her into prostitution to meet the ashram's basic needs. When Kalyani meets Narayan who is follower of Gandhiji and wants to marry a widow (Kalyani), she has new hopes in her life. When Madhumati comes to know about this she says, "Shameless! You'll sink yourself and us! We'll be cursed. We must live in purity, to die in purity" (Water:144).

Here a paradoxical view is presented, Madhumati considers marriage of a widow as impure but the same woman forces Kalyani into prostitution. When she learns about the marriage she gets worried because Kalyani financially supports her to run the ashram, she shouts, "and how we survive here, no one can question. Not even God" (Water:144). This shows that the most pathetic issue of the widows- is survival of their life, for which the widows are battling with the hardships of life. Despite all odds and opposition Narayan and Kalyani decides to marry. But when Kalyani comes to know that he is the son of Seth Dwarka Nath, who is one of her clients all her dreams are shattered. She drowns herself. Seth Dwarka Nath who was did not appreciate Kalyani as daughter-in-law and groans at her sight during day time, sleeps with her at night. On the contrary Narayan's father says, "Our holy texts say Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want, and the women they sleep with are blessed" (Water:174).

The rich people know very well that the poor widows in order to earn livelihood will easily get involved in sexuality. But then also the blame lies on the widows as they are considered threats to the society. It is clear in Bhagya's soliloquy that, "a woman's sexuality and fertility, which [has been] so valuable to her husband in his lifetime [is] converted upon his death into a potential danger to the morality of the community" (*Water*: 24).

It is the reason that widows get discarded from the society. The men take advantage of their weak position and use them to satisfy their sexual lust as Stefano Mercanti describes, "within the patriarchal system, which has prevailed over most of recorded history, there is rape, wife battering, incest, and other structural forms of violence designed to maintain men's domination over women" (Mercanti:165).

In an interview with Francesco Mannoni, Sidhwa was asked:

With the story of the young Chuiya, widow of an old man she married at seven and segregated in the widow ashram, did you mean to sum up the constrictions of most Asiatic women, who still suffer privations and freedom restrictions, often slaves of an ancestral rule that isolates them from life?

(Mannoni:1)

To which Sidhwa replied:

Little Chuiya's story is particular to the laws that govern the lives of Hindu widows. Christian, Muslims and other religious groups don't have these laws, but the prejudice has affected most widows in India. You are right. Millions of women in South Asia still have almost no control over their lives. They live in privation and their freedoms are restricted. I've told their stories in my other novels. (Mannoni:1)

The society which is governed and outshined by male- chauvinists treats woman like a commodity. Widowhood and its own aftermaths are inflicted on women. All these problems are depicted by Sidhwa as the rotten part of Indian social history.

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