

Widows-The Most Oppressed Community

Portrayal of widows in Bapsi Sidhwa's Water

Pooja Bhardwaj

Sonipat, Haryana

Abstract

The emotional sexual and Psychological stereotyping of Females begins when the doctor says, "It's a girl"

The above quote by Shirley Chisholm illustrates the hidden costs that a woman has to pay every day for being a "girl". The above lines clearly show that how from the very beginning the discrimination against a girl start taking place. Since the moment she takes birth people Start behaving differently to her. Even her parents who should be the source of never-ending love and Kindness also treat her in a different light as compared to the son. They are considered 'Harijans' in the Society. They are Harijan in the sense that they are estranged from the main stream. They are confined to a lower social standing or outer limit or edge as marginalized. Being marginalized refers to being separated from the rest of the society and distanced from the power centre. And this abjectly is the condition of women in the society.

Though Our constitution provides and guarantees for an equal opportunity in all professional fields for female, Yet an alarming rise is noticed in the atrocities committed against women. Patriarchy asserts itself through legal loopholes to consolidate the age-old domination. whether it is health, education, care, nutrition, property rights, life savings, security, acknowledgement, etc., women always find themselves at the lower case of the ladder. They face exploitation and use to suffer in many ways. **There are other horrible ways through which women are suppressed and exploited in the society.** out of these one is widowhood. Treatment of widows is very bad and is always indifferent in society since ages. **In all Cultures, religions, regions, class and caste, the treatment of widows all over the world especially in the south Asian subcontinent and in Africa is quite discriminatory. Infact they are the most discriminated females in all the societies.**

All the dignity and status is lost with the life of husband for woman, as if she herself is not a living being. All what she has is an identity related to a man in the society, whether it is father or husband. A widow becomes a symbol of bad omen, etc. All her rights are ceased once she lost her husband. Mistreatment has to be faced by her through her paternal and inlaws family. She can't be a part of celebration and she with the death of her husband faces an "identity crisis" and "social death" for herself. She faces various external and internal subjugation and social stigma.

Bapsi Sidhwa- the author of four famous novels (American Brat, Crow Eater, Pakistani Bride, Cracking India and Water); has a great reverence and veneration for women who is a primordial symbol of suffering and sacrifice. She is profoundly perplexed at perpetual and perennial problem pertaining to women. She has disclosed her disappointment and disgruntlement at the condition of women specially widows through the novel "Water". Through this novel she has tried to compel her readers to reflect and realize the pathetic condition of widows in our society. She has succinctly summed up deploring and muted state of the South Asian widows in this novel.

This paper is an attempt to portray widows in the novel "Water" and show their pathetic condition in the society.

As water is essential for survival but has no cost, similarly a woman who is the creator of the world and is needed for the creation but has no value. As water is used by everybody similarly a woman is utilized by everyone and the way water is polluted by people for their use similarly a woman is contaminated by everybody for his or her selfish motif. It can be compared to Munshi Premchand's short stories Kafan and Dudh Ka Daam where he has tried to show that woman sacrifices her whole life for others but her sacrifices carry not much value.

Water is about Indian widows in the 1930. In the past and even in the present many women whose husband have died are forced to enter "widow Houses" and labeled as worthless without a husband. They struggle to survive by begging and are forced to turn to prostitution. The text is set in 1930s but situation is no better today. It depicts the traits, sufferings and defeats of women. Here Sidhwa pays attention towards the treatment given by the society to the widows. She has depicted that condition of widows has not changed in the society. She is still the sufferer and victim of the patriarchal system and is penalised every day for being a widow. Though their suffering varies in degree, extent or intensity. This is

what Sidhwa has tried to show through different characters such as Chuhiya, Kalyani, Shakuntala and other widows in the novel and the movie.

Once a woman's husband dies, she loses all their status and respect in the society. She is shunned by her community, labeled witch, banned from attending happy celebrations and treated as domestic slave. In *Water*, widow is abandoned to the temples or widow Ashrams to survive on her own. She is not allowed to eat fried food as it is considered to arouse sexual desires. In the novel, a character- Bua throughout her life wanted to eat some sweet dish but because of the orthodox tradition she doesn't get even a single ladoo.

Similarly there is one more incidence when Gulabi the Eunuch offered Chuhiya half eaten Puri then Madhumati stops her with a shrill cry, "Are you mad? Giving a widow forbidden food."(sidhwa, 78) She is not allowed to visit auspicious places because she is considered inauspicious (for having causes her husband's death), Even if her shadow falls on someone it is considered unholy. It is considered bad omen.

Sidhwa has depicted this pathetic condition of women through various incidences like when a woman at the river goped at Kalyani she collided with Kalyani, gives an ugly expression and says, "You've polluted me, I have to bath again." (Sidhwa, *Water*)

Similarly, one day when Shakuntala goes to the river to get holy water for the priest Sadananta, a marriage ceremony was taking place there. She wants to get a glimpse of them, but the priest forbids her from their says, "Don't eat your shadow touch the bride." (Sidhwa, P:94)

There is another incidence when Chuhiya runs after her dog Kalu. Then one of the customers shakes his head and remarks, "They shouldn't allow widows to run around like this. They bring bad luck to our business." (Sidhwa, 98)

Similar situation has been depicted by Raj Kapoor in his movie "Prem Rog" where Manorma is married to a rich landlord and he dies in an accident and after that she is forced to live a miserable life. She is forced to live the life of a Hindu widow i.e.-one simple meal a day, no footwear, simple white garb and is regarded as an ill omen by the rest of the society.

It is ironical that on one hand patriarchal society forces a widow to live away from the Materialistic world i.e. if her to shave her head, as it does not allow her to wear stitched cloths. On the other hand it for its self interest uses her, forces her to go for prostitution. This is clearly shown in "Water" through Madhumati who on one hand says that women shouldn't eat forbidden food, on the other hand she herself eats food different from other widows and she asks Kalyani to grow her hair, force her to go for prostitution only for her self-interest.

This hypocritical stance is what perplexes innocent, law-abiding person. The pitiable thing is that even she has accepted her fate as it is. The tradition has made her a slave whose life is bound by the clutches of religion and customs. She thinks that by following these blind customs she would attain 'Moksha'. Even the educated woman is not able to understand the politics behind these traditions and customs. Even Shakuntala who is educated doesn't agree to widow remarriage as she says; "Even thinking about marriage is a sin." (Sidhwa, *water*)

And when Shankutala support her to go and marry Narayana the other widows resist her for doing as they have fixed this thing in their mind that whatever the head will say would be right as they thing that the head posses the words of God and he knows about the welfare of all the widows. As in the novel *Water* when Shakuntala was supporting Kalyani in marrying Narayana, the other widows resist her by saying; " Don't open the door, didi. Please, didi Madhumati knows what is best for us." (Sidhwa, *Water*) Simultaneously Madhumati forces her not to free her by bitterly saying: "If you open the door, you will destroy us all." (Sidhwa, 159)

Thus, from the earlier discussion it can be analyzed that widowhood represents a "Social death" for women. It is not merely they have lost their husband, but widowhood rubs them of their status and consigns them to the very margins of society where they suffer the most extreme forms of discrimination and stigma.

Widows are the poorest of the poor and least protected by the law because their lives are likely to be determined by local, patriarchal interpretation of tradition, customs and religion. And women are so much entangled into these customs that are unable to come out of them.

With the help of present paper an attempt has been made to portray the condition of women and it is found that women are perhaps the most oppressed community in the history, swung into action immediately after they start breathing in open air. Though the constitution has started giving equal opportunity, but patriarchy asserts itself through legal loopholes to consolidate the age-old domination. However, their suppression is not only external but intrinsic too. The socio-Psychological makeup of most rural and urban women has been shaped and molded by more.

than a century of patriarchal beliefs and a family system where the man (in the form of father or husband) is equivalent to God. The feeling of inferiority has been embedded in their psyche so much so that far from condemning acts of violence against them they are likelier to throttle the voices in favour of them. This is part of the clichéd vicious circle of illiteracy, social backwardness and selfish motif of the patriarchal society that accounts for all the result and backwardness of the gender and suffering of women.

Conclusion: Thus to conclude it can be said that “water” succeeds in making apparent the helplessness of widows trapped within the social greed when they have neither the means nor the opportunities of standing by themselves in defiance of society. The novel “Water” addresses global readers in an attempt to alert the conscience of the world by enabling the silent pain of the Hindu widows to reach out to global readers.

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