

Problems Faced by Brahmanical Tradition in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water*

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Abstract:

Widowhood is the marital status that a man or woman gains once his or her spouse has died. A widow is a woman whose spouse has died, and a widower is a man whose spouse died. Widowhood is one of the most deeply distressing life events experienced by adults, and it becomes more likely as people age. *Water* takes the most controversial issues like patriarchy, religion, corruption, widowhood, child prostitution and hidden love. The novel *Water* depicts the condition of widow's in India where they are treated like animals.

Keywords: Inauspicious, Liberation, Identity, Cremation, Desirable .

The story begins with Chuyia, a six years old girl who lives with her parents in the village in the Bihar Bengal Border. Her carefree life through woods in search of gooseberries and leeches changes unexpectedly when she is married to Harilal, a 44 year old widower. But Somnath, Chuyia's father, a poor Brahmin priest, decline his wife's concerns about Chuyia's age with this authoritative quotes from the shastras:

“In the Brahmanical tradition ,” said Somnath, shifting into the soothing and at the same times authoritative mode he adopted when speaking to his clients, “a woman is recognized person only when she is on with her husband. Only then does she become a sumangali, an auspicious woman, as if recalling a passage from a holy book, he half-closed his lids to add, “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”.

(14)

In the short time, Chuyia's husband goes near to death in Somnath's home and Chuyia is taken on a bullock cart carrying her dying husband, accompanied by her father and mother-in-law. Chuyia hardly even remembers being married to the man, but as tradition demands, she has to accompany his dead body to Varanasi, where he will be cremated at the Holy Ghats. After the cremation, she is expected to live in a widow's ashram. Chuyia is transported from a child's carefree life and a loving family to a widow's ashram. After the cremation at the ghats in Rewalpur, she is stripped off marriage markers, her red and green bangles and mangalsutra and is draped in a coarse homespun white cloth.

Within the dominator system, the widow constitutes threat to society as she is perceived to be inauspicious and polluted, because of her association with death and sexually dangerous as she becomes desirable and uncontrolled by a male counterpart. The disfiguring of the body is enforced in order to reduce their attractiveness as women by prohibiting them from wearing the symbols of marriage like vermilion mark, bangles, marriage pendent and, more deeply traumatic, having their heads shaven.

Almost forty years ago, Madhumati faced the same situation. When she became widow, she was raped by two men, beaten and taken twenty miles into the wilderness. She was saved by Gulabi and she was brought to the ashram.

Another poor widow, Bua, comes from the family of landowners who has hounded her out of her house when her husband dies. Bua becomes widow when she is about thirty five. Another widow named as Shakuntala is married to a young widower. Her mother-in-law is hopeful that Shankuntala will be the instrument by which her son would fulfil his debt to their forefathers by reproducing sons. As the years pass by, she becomes increasingly hateful towards her barren daughter-in-law. A man is not questioned for his importance. Shakuntala has just turned thirty and her husband dies. Now her only useful role, that of wife and producer of sons, was gone forever. She is not only viewed as responsible for her husband's family. She feels that all eyes are watching and waiting for her to commit some sin that will bring curses on them and consign her husband to hell. So she has come to the ashram.

Kalyani is a young widower. Kalyani's fate is similar to that of Chuyia. Kalyani's mother dies before she has reached her first birthday. Word of Kalyani's beauty spread and she is married to the highest bidder, a man of sixty, when she is six. After her husband death, her head is shaved but Madhumati allows her to grow her hair back because she wants to force her into prostitution.

The brutal transmutation of Chuyia's body being shorn as a trademark of her civil death, and the strict severance from old ties marks the beginning of the miserable life that awaits her in the destitute widow's house, "with her white sari and bald yellow head, Chuyia was a very different child from the girl who had ridden in the bullock cart" (44).

With the passage of time, Chuyia's defiance is tempered and she begins to accept the austere ways adopted by the other widows. The rest of the novel revolves around the lives of the widows in the ashram around the beautiful young Kalyani, the only widow whose head shorn, around Shakuntala whose belief in the scriptures is unwavering and absolute, and of course, around Chuyia.

As a widow, Chuyia is not allowed to touch non-widows. She has to take care that even her shadow does not fall on them because she and her shadow are considered polluted. She is expected to spend most of her time inside the ashram, praying or fasting in atonement for whatever sins caused her husband death. The Hindus believed that widowhood was the direct consequence of a sinful past life. As widows were not allowed to remarry, eight year old Chuyia should very well expect to spend her entire life confined to the ashram. Though the rules governing the life of the widows were indeed severe, the practice was followed primarily by Brahmin widows from poorer backgrounds. Furthermore, not all widows were forced to leave. Some left their homes out of their own will, driven by the belief that a widow whose husband dies young is guilty of husband murder in one of her previous incarnations, and in a quest to attain self-liberation through a life of austerity with devotion and service to God. 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" (184).

As widows are not allowed to remarry, six years old Chuyia could very well expect to spend her entire life confined to the ashram. In Brahminical tradition a woman is recognized as a person only when she is one with her husband. Outside of marriage, the wife has no recognized existence. So, when her husband dies, she should cease to exist. The same thinking is responsible for the cruel act of sati which fortunately was outlawed in 1829.

Some other writers have also pointed out several inaccuracies in the depiction of Hindu widowhood, which allegedly fail to frame their plight in the right socio-cultural context and anchor the narrative to Orientalist discourses. However to read *water* as a mere critique of Hindu patriarchal orthodoxy is much detrimental as it is a denial of its universal appeal in evoking the redemptive potential of all human beings for social change and renewal. Far from representing a praise portrayal of socio-cultural practises and outlooks of Hindu widowhood in pre-independence India, sidhwa are legitimately correct in their interpretation of the novel and the flim as being against violence, beyond the boundaries of time and space. As they have stated in many interviews, the exploration of the widows; plight served as a main background for a deeper questioning of the difference between moral conscience and religious conservatism, thus transcending local and national boundaries and symbolizing the revolt of all women against physical and psychological violation. Such an approach is creatively expressed in novel through the central message of arousing women's awareness and overcoming dominator hierarchies. *Water* frames Indian widows within aspects of Indian culture and society that skill inhabit several aspects of life, both in economic and regional areas. According to Chen, there are several reasons for this high proportion in contemporary India:

Marriage in India is near universal; husbands are five years older on average than wives; male mortality rates are still rather high; women begin to outlive men after their productive years; and, most importantly, widow remarriage is infrequent(...) Most societies have social rules and norms designed to regulate women's life(...) Even now, in some communities in India, girls are marries before they reach puberty. As a result, they are child widows, including so called 'virgin' widows whose marriages had not been before their 'husband' died. (Chen 2001 p.3)

Water further emphasises that the social and religious context in the construction of widows as ‘socially dead’ are enacted and reinforced through the religious ritualized patterns, such as the shaving of a widow’s head and fasting, and the custom of wearing a white sari. Analysing the symbolic interpretations of the white sari and the rituals of shaving widow’s head, Uma Chakravarti argues that “the colour codes of red and white are systematically sustained in the widow opposition. Whereas red symbols fertility and sexuality, white symbolizes a sexuality and death” (Chakravarti 76). Similarly, the shaving of the widow’s heads signifies their symbolic castration, the loss of sexuality as women’s hair is considered as the symbol of sexuality, power and freedom. As Chakravarti argues, “The Widow’s social death stems from her alienation from reproduction and sexuality, following the loss of her exclusion from the functioning social unit of the family” (Chakravarti 64).

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