

Full Length Research

“Learn to Live Like a Lotus Untouched by the Filthy Water It Grows in” – A Study of Contention in Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel “Water”.

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This present paper focuses on the contention of Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel, “Water”, and i.e. “Learn to live like a lotus, untouched by the filthy water it grows in”. This is too idealistic a statement to be interpreted tangibly. Although it is not possible to live in a society full of injustices and prejudices and yet not get influenced by it. But Sidhwa with amazing authority, flair and ease in her novel, shows that whatever the circumstances are, the most important thing sustaining human existence is optimism, hope and “adamant” courage. Throughout this exquisite piece of writing the focus is mainly upon the strength of character with a tinge of determination. Bapsi Sidhwa through her spokesperson Chuya, speaks the world of enigmatic personalities; who notwithstanding harshest of human conditions emerge out pure and clean. She is the emblem of inherent feminine strength. Chuya, a “diminutive doll,” is a real victim of unthinking adherence to tradition. She is the symbol of change for all the widows living in the Ashram. These widows have accepted their degraded traditional status by remaining silent. They are living beings but with dead souls. Our paper is more concerned with Chuya’s question: “Where is the Ashram for men Widows?” She questions the authority of so-called male society. She questions the one –sided decadent values and customs, aimed at weaker faction of the socio-cultural order. Here remaining “untouched” is realistically unrealistic.

Key Words: Water, Contention, determination, hope, injustices, socio-cultural.

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INTRODUCTION

Bapsi Sidhwa is leading Pakistani English Language novelist. She is stylistically dexterous and her fiction offers a sensitive insight into the complexities of life in the Sub-continent with particular focus on the lives of women. She gracefully depicts religious fundamentalism, and the impact of modern ideas of Mahatma Gandhi on the tradition of colonial India during partition. Feminist

approach is the focal aspect of Sidhwa’s novels. Other such, presenting same ideas are “Cracking India” and “The Bride”.

Sidhwa is considered as one of the profoundest feminist novelists of the sub-continent. She was honored with Bunting Fellowship at Harvard. “Water” is the waterline of her literary career with British Raj setting, when India was under rule of British Empire. She touches a sensitive feminist issue of the time, marriage of young

girls to older men, a very commonplace practice in most of the parts of India. Whenever a man hailing from an orthodox family died, his young widow was forced to spend rest of her life in an ashram, in order to make amends for the sins of her previous life which supposedly caused her husband's death. Water is basically a new theme version of Deepa Mehta's film which exposed hypocrisy and duplicity of Indian Society in and around 1930s, especially where is conceded women, in particular the unfortunate widow, for whom, "Life is so disappointing". (Sidhwa)

Water, a written expression of the movie explores the dark morbidity of human society. It is a drama about the repression and subjection of women. The main focus throughout is "plight of widows". The deplorable impression of expression astounds us for a moment or so that how these women were living noxiously and how the society around them manipulated religion for personal benefits. The fluency with which the novel takes its course of action, transports the reader into an unknown world of very different, unthinkable cultural values. Sidhwa herself said about "Water": "The plot and the characters were already there, but I had to bring the skeletal script and cinematic images to life with words. Besides being a gripping story, the plot deals with the subject close to my heart – in that case, the oppressive hold of tradition on women, in this case, religious tradition. It tells of oppression and the constraints that govern even a girl child's life in a patriarchal society. I have always been active in women's issues." (Sidhwa)

Sidhwa has always been into the feminism, which enriched her understanding of women's life issues. She has that specific insight into those unsighted realities to canvas the subtle description of Hindu widows in "Water". In fact, into an attempt to raise awareness about the various difficulties these outcast women face in real life. The issues like child marriage, legal status of widows, and the problem they experience after the death of their husband is discussed and analyzed in detail.

The story of the novel, follows the child, "Chuya", "Little Mouse", who is betrothed at the age of six and widowed at the age of eight. According to the Hindu tradition, she is thrown away into a widow ashram, her head shaved, and her life given over to penitence. After reading the novel a number of queries stuck our mind and soul as to how a father abandon her child for good? Why these women should suffer for what had happened to them? They had no control over their lives and the misfortunes befallen upon them by Nature.

Women novelists transcended in writing about females only after Second World War. Their themes were a range of experiences about women living in squalid and terrifying conditions. In Sidhwa's novels the themes swerve "from traditional to Contemporary". (Naeem). Pakistan and India shared common literary and cultural heritage till 1947. (Naeem). Impressions of the same are virtually visible in this novel Water. Originally tended by

Deepa Mehta, the novel sticks to stoicism of Hindu culture. It reveals the "dynamics of power within Hindu Religious Society. (Laltha, Diasporic Identities, Divine Presences and the Dynamics of Power in Deepa Mehta's Filmography (1996-2008))

Just as Fire, 1996, Water also spurred antagonistic attitude from Hindu protestors who reacted with violence towards the script. (Laltha) At the heart of this novel, there is dominant figure of a woman in the shape of helpless daughter, an inexperienced forced wife, and unwonted widow. We find entangled contradictions in this novel, with the exposition of double standards of the Hindu socio-cultural setup. They base the terrifying women posture of society upon Hindu Religious scriptures, that "dictate the life of a woman", much related to Hindu Mythology.

The airing of movie "water" caused eruption of violence within the country. Before filming could start the set of the film was set on fire by the violent protestors. They declaimed that the script openly offended Hindu Scriptures and Mother India. (Kulla). Upon serious protests the shooting of the film was stopped and relocated to Sri Lanka and a Lake was depicted as River Ganges. (Mukherjee). Deepa Mehta and her whole crew was threatened though she belonged to Indian Diaspora. The protestors claimed that she misrepresented the Indian Society. (Chaudhuri). The hostile protestations were due to the fact that "Water" was to go on air the world over. It focused on the hideous part of women life in the sub-continent so it could spur international debate upon the widows of India. The violent protests were evident of the fact that Indian subcontinent was not at all ready to accept some foibles in their old testaments and scriptures. Works like "Water" are direct juxtaposition to their political slogan as "emergent economic global power." (Chaudhuri).

The Hindu texts were imposed and interpreted by Brahmin pundits, they imposed upper caste Brahminic code on the lower castes, suffused with traditional and customary practices. (Viridi). Thus "Water" was accused of giving "exotic" image to the Hindu culture. (Chaudhuri). Sidhwa's book "Water" also holds up well as an independent work. It was not easy for her to work on such a project. As she stated that, "I was hesitant because I have worked within the confines of a structured story before." (Sidhwa, Water). Moreover, it is very well stated by one of the readers of "Water" that it is a well-read for anybody interested in women's issues, cultural confines, and customs of India.

Veil of Religion - used to justify the treatment towards women.

The motto behind writing "Water", if on the one hand is to criticize the prejudice of Indian society in 1930s, but on the other hand it is the development of the soul of a man

who inquires the essential humanity. Bapsi here traces out the histories filled with injustice against women and a complex politics of post-colonial India. She altogether exposes the religious stereotypes of the exotic and strange Indian culture. The reader lives in yes or no about Indian Culture and Religion, very hard to separate each other. We come to encounter confusion when Chuya's father, Somnath said that, "In the Brahmanical tradition, a woman is recognized as a person only when she is one with her husband, only then she becomes a sumangali, an auspicious woman, a saubhagyavati, a fortune woman". (Sidhwa).

Both Deepa Mehta and Bapsi Sidhwa point out the controversy surrounding Water. "The way religion was unleashed on us using religion to shut us down is surely the core of the writing, it was to what extent we manipulate religion to serve our personal benefits." (Mehta). Religion is used to justify the terrible treatment of widows but the economics really lie behind the decision to expel them from their families," disguise as religion it's just about money", said Narayan the young lawyer and the follower of Gandhi, tell one of the widows that, "one less mouth to feed, four saris saved, one bed and a corner is saved, there is no other reason why you are here." (Sidhwa, Water).

"Water", is in juxtaposition to the idea of "purity" taken in the most condescending way. It criticizes the Brahmanical tradition which allows every sin under the covers of religion; divinity and essential pride of women are always taken for granted. Sidhwa shows us horrible and indefensible religious oppression of the Hindu women. This is a gut-wrenching tale whereas the "poor soul" (Chuya) has to struggle a lot even to ensure that she is a human being after all.

"Sidhwa expands her canvas to show how Hindu patriarchy has used religion to institutionalize the twin systems of marriage and widowhood to their advantage. She exposes the reality that both the systems are built intertwined in a way that patriarchic social system takes advantage of the miseries of the other sex to the maximum. By Chuya's character Sidhwa creates multi-vocal voice that unmasks the complexities of unforgiving patriarchic social system at work in Hindu culture. This patriarchal – religious structure makes women vulnerable to social evils. The process of outcast the women after being widowed or not having child is still kept in place by the religious dogmas and tradition which provides ground to the exploitation of women at all levels." (Salam) "The females become the victim of their femaleness". (Katrek)

Learn to live like a lotus – untouched by the filthy water it grows in.

Sidhwa has beautifully used the image of water to drive the force of the story, which flows in a current and nourishes our insight with ever-changing force. If water is

symbolized as a life giver, revitalizer, source of survival, then ironically it is a way of purgation from deadly sins.

Here the statement, "learn to live like a lotus, untouched by the filthy water it grows in" is however, the contention of the novel. Symbolically the widows clad in white are called "lotus" that apparently are considered "untouched" and "pure" whereas the filthy water that surrounds them is the prejudiced society. Chuya is one such character beautifully portrayed by Sidhwa, who is young enough to even remember getting married. After her marriage she continues to live in her parental home as was the custom with wedded pre-pubescent girls. Not long after, news of her husband's death reaches Somnath's home and Chuya is taken on a bullock-cart carrying her dying husband, accompanied by her father and mother-in-law.

After the cremation she is stripped of marriage makers, her red and green bangles and is draped in a coarse homespun white cloth and left at an ashram for widows. Chuya's lack of comprehension and anger at being left at the doorstep of a strange place by her own father, and the screams for her mother is an image that stays long in the reader's mind, made more so by Sidhwa's understated description as seen through the eyes of a bewildered child. Unmoved by Chuya's tears, Madhumati, a soulless, grotesque figure whose every word is law in the ashram, tells the child-widow, "And when our husbands die, God help us, the wives also half die. So how can a poor half-dead woman feel any pain?" (Sidhwa) In tears Chuya replies but with an adult's logic "because she is half alive."

Eight years old widow of forty years old husband, becomes the victim of artificial boundaries of traditions and religion-based culture. These widows were deprived of all the worldly pleasures, and the things which can rigger their sexuality deep down. But they are the victims of prostitution. They cannot wear colors and stitched clothes. The Incharge of that Ashram was Madhumati, forced Kalyani into prostitution saying ironically, "We must live in purity, to die in purity". These women are forced into a life of compromise.

From one miserable life the ladies land into squalid. The authorities of the Ashram force these miserable widows to become prostitutes. Gulabi a eunuch, has this side business of providing women to people. Kalyani was forced into prostitution to support the ashram. She is valued for her beauty and is the only widow whose hair is not shorn.

Among them Chuya comes as a fighter. Her stubborn resistance to ancient superstitions adds a bright spot of life to the dreary existence of these women. Chuya's fate changes when Kalyani falls into love with Narayan. Kalyani is exposed to modern thought of remarriage of widows. Hence, she with Narayan becomes the savoir of Chuya. Kalyani and Chuya emerge as two beautiful souls amid the misery, who survived and blossomed, one by giving her life and giving a ray of hope to the other.

Role of Water in the Lives of Widows

The success behind *Water*, is the use of subtle elements to get its controversial themes across. It's this subtlety that captivates the readers within a deep and troubling story line unlike many mainstream novels where the messages are bluntly expressed. In *Water* Sidhwa and Mehta express the themes using common elements. The most obvious element is water itself. It plays a key role in the novel as it marks a beginning and ending and shows the conflict between purity and impurity, for example the ashram is by water, where the widows bathe to cleanse but it is also where they are burned when they die. Water plays a role in the love story between Kalyani and Narayan, marking their beginning – they find themselves facing each other up close when Kalyani spills water on Narayan – and their ending. Though she underwent all the atrocities by the hands of the authorities of the ashram, her hopes never died. She found the glory of true love, the physical pain inflicted upon her made her stronger.

Kalyani believed in Krishna-ji's saying in *Gita* that "learn to live like a lotus, untouched by filthy water in grows in." After reading this statement it arises in mind that it is not possible for a human being to live like a lotus. Krishna was a god so he lived purely like a lotus flower. Buddhist and Hindus in their scriptures used the metaphor of Lotus in different perspectives. The lotus behaves strangely while in water. It has large leaves that float on the surface of the water. The most beautiful thing about Lotus flower is that although for its sustenance lotus flower depends upon water but it does not let itself devoured by the filth in the water and remains wet.

"Ancient Egypt is the earliest-known civilization to have revered the lotus flower and used it to symbolize various things, such as fertility, birth and purity. The lotus is also considered an embodiment of perfection in various Asian religions, with particular reference to Buddhism and Hinduism. Its unique quality is said to symbolize the human who rises from the darkness of the world into a new way of thinking and living. In the Buddhist tradition, the flower that rises above the muddy waters represents the act of ascending above all desires and attachments."

"According to Buddhism, this is the key to achieving spiritual enlightenment. Despite the flower having its roots in the mud, it grows upward in the direction of light. This is believed to represent the aspiration to rise above and move towards light. The lotus, therefore, symbolizes the journey from darkness (as depicted by the muddy pond) to the light of knowledge or wisdom."

"In the Hindu tradition, the place in which the lotus flower blossoms (its dark and dirty waters) represents a wise and spiritually-enlightened person, who performs their duty without any material or emotional desires. The ability to detach oneself from such desires enables one to remain unaffected by all worldly pleasures and gain, thus

achieving spiritual perfection. At its center, the lotus bud is compared to a folded heart or soul, which has the ability to blossom or awaken to divine truth."

Bapsi also uses this analogy of the lotus leaf, to convey the message of these widows, who though physically have been in the filth, as they work at night as prostitutes, but their souls remain pure. They indulge in what they do not have heart. These women in the Ashram get the divine consciousness about right and wrong but are forced to surrender to the tradition and harsh value-knit weave of religious demands.

CONCLUSION

"The lotus flower blooms most beautifully from the deepest mud" - Buddhist Proverb

This gut-wrenching tale is still able to find humor and hope in unimaginable circumstances. The novel is dense with emotions. It supports a worldwide revolution to bring justice for the women of that part of the world. In spite of the horrible and indefensible religious oppression of the Hindu women in the book, the hope of youth keeps it becoming too oppressive and depressing. It points to the Indian Culture with a sour taste in the mouth. Now it is supposed that modern India has journeyed far since 1938.

Sidhwa through this book, honors the awful fate of those once left behind. The novel concludes with a flicker of hope. Kalyani's apparently negative end which is of committing suicide turns out to be the most positive end of the novel, and also in the lives of the widows. If she had not taken this step the brutal society may give birth to another young widow prostitute. She, therefore, saved them all. She is the only initiator of future hope. As Gandhi's train passes through the village, the prospects of rescue from punishing Hindu tradition seems palpable. The growing influence of Gandhi does in fact seem to indicate a better future for the victims of tradition. Water also reminds us once again that the unthinking adherence to traditions is still very much alive.

Sidhwa is not a moralist, but she implicitly wants to moralize by showing us such a realistic aspect of society, which is deadly hard to forget. Yet she gives us a spark of hope and a dim ray of light and proves nothing is impossible. One can manage to live like a lotus amongst this hyper, brutal herd of men. Prying for these women. These women arise from the squalor and filth of the social values, with purity of stature and divinity of soul. They are indeed the lotus flowers; their leaves are their inner values which make them aloof from all the filth of the wicked social system.

"Growing from the mud and blooming towards the sky, they symbolize purity, spiritual awakening, revival and fortune."

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