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Water by Bapsi Sidhwa: A Critique of Women Exploitation and Child Marriage

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Abstract

Based on the exploitation of widows at Varanasi, Bihar-Bengal-border, the novel *Water* by Bapsi Sidhwa fictionalize the child marriages and women (widow) predicament through widow houses. The women like Chuyia, Kalyani became the victim of patriarchal domination and religious fundamentalism where women voice has no value. Besides the tragedy of widows, the novel centers on child protagonists like Chuyia and her predicament. *Water* is also known as the postcolonial novel and it is purely based on women exploitation. The religious conventions and social traditions are the centers of humiliation and exploitation of women.

Keywords- Widow, Exploitation, Silence, Tragedy, Injustice, Marginal, Dowry

Water by Bapsi Sidhwa highlights the society of the pre-independence India. The novel explicitly sets out women's exploitation centering to an eight year old girl Chuyia, the daughter of Somnath and Bhagya. Chuyia, a child-bride goes to a widow ashram in Benaras at the age of eight after the death of her fifty year old husband Hira Lal. The novel *Water* highlights the darker side of physically and psychologically broken women forced into widow ashrams against their wish and desires. Without the fault of their own, they became the martyr and sacrifice their life's pleasures and enjoyment.

Published in 2006, the novel *Water* is the riveting examinations of the lives of widows in Colonial India. The society, tradition, history and religious fundas are only in favor of men and not of women. The young women who forced into the widow ashrams after the death of their husbands. The widows are very much innocent and they were totally innocent about widow systems. The widows like Chuyia face the worst treatment considering it as their fate. The widowhood is not the end but it is the beginning of dark

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world. Having no source from any agency or society ultimately these widows are used as sex-workers. Begging in front of the temples and Prostitution are the only ways to earn the money and to run the widow ashram and livelihood.

The novel mainly centers on the lives of two widows-Chuyia and Kalyani. These two widows represent the women predicament which finally leads to the redemption. Kalyani the young widow worked as a prostitute to run the ashram. Narayan the Gandhian idealist fell in love with Kalyani but he couldn't marry her. Seth Dwarkanath, the representative of Hindu tradition boldly oppose their relationship and the idea of getting marriage. The post colonial era and the society's vision towards women is the prime motto of the novel. Besides Chuyia and Kalyani, there are around twenty widows under the authority of Madhumati; they are Snehalata, Shakuntala, Kunti, and Bua and so on. Unwilling to accept her fate, Chuyia becomes a catalyst for change in the lives of the widows. The child protagonist Chuyia attempts to be the catalyst and asks for the house of men widows. The widowhood is the beginning of the suffering. First the woman lost the husband means she was broken physically and psychologically. The husband dies and the very next day she was thrown into dark widow ashrams. The woman couldn't recover properly and forget her husband then also she forcibly sent to widow houses. Nobody thinks of her condition. And everybody plans to send her to the widow houses.

The novel represents the darker side of the society in which physically and psychologically broken women forced into widow ashrams against their wish and desires. Secondly these young widows whose life begins to bloom before that their husband dies. Without the fault of their own, they became the martyr and devote their life's pleasures and enjoyment. The society and religious fundas are only in favor of men not of women.

Being a woman, social reformer and writer, Bapsi Sidhwa, the representative of the age very well depicts many hidden and unexposed ideas of society and religion through the novel. The novel also satirizes the upper class that use and exploited the widows instead any help. Sexual exploitation of widows also is the exposure of the novel. The novelist also tries to reunite and resettle to Kalyani and Narayana, but the upper caste Seth Dwarkanath reject it. Seth Dwarkanath suggests him to keep her instead marry. At the same time Kalyani was many times sexually exploited by Seth Dwarkanath, the father of Narayana.

Chuyia gets married without knowing the marriage concept. The marriage of Chuyia is the only consolation for Somnath that they don't want a dowry; and they will pay for the wedding. Guided by traditional idea of womanhood, Somnath was firm with the idea of

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'woman's happiness is at the husband's home'. According to him woman is nothing, she has no identity and importance without husband. Once she get marry, she get's everything name, place, identity, freedom and protection. Chuyia's father has not thought of the age difference between Chuyia and Hiralal. Bhagya his wife also against his decision but he doesn't care her.

The novelist further presents the horror of such marriages and the tragedy of women. Four years after the marriage, Somnath came home with the news that Hiralal's is ill. Long illness and the out broke of typhoid took Hiralal's life. Hiralal's death means the death of Chuyia. Chuyia's mother-in-law wishes for her son to die on the banks of the Ganga so he can liberate his soul and attain moksha. As she expects Chuyia must be at his side, the innocent Chuyia doesn't know such deaths and her transformation into a widow.

The death of Hiralal made Chuyia widow, and a widow means according to the tradition and culture she has to undergo and face many limitations. The smashing of bangles is one of the steps of beginning widowhood. Widow never is allowed to wear colored or stitched cloths. Widows are only allowed to wear white sari like all widows wear. And finally the barber has cut all the hairs. It was the belief that widows did not shave her head. It is said that the every drop of water that fell upon the hair would polluted the husband's soul.

The novelist highly exposes the violation of Chuyia, as a colonized girl child, first became the victim of patriarchy and secondly of the tradition. The novelist discusses Chuyia's journey as a child, wife and widow in the very short span of four years. Before understanding anything about society, culture, and life she was forced into widowhood. The widowhood is considered as an act of penetration. The concept of widowhood for Chuyia was beyond her comprehension. The hallow religions' misguides and the people blindly follow it. The impact of colonization on people, and the imperialism of patriarchy and tradition have crushed many women's life. The ashram was the darker experience of one who meets it. The widows have faced here the death like experience. There they could not get sufficient food. And the adversity in the ashram is for them similar to hell. As a teacher widowhood teaches them new experiences and modes in life at every walk of life while living in the widow house. The first and most significant mark of adversity that forced young widows into prostitution. Thus, the novel, *Water* highlights the lives of widows and their sufferings in the colonial India.

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Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the distinguished feminist writers who have made much unique contribution to the feminist literature. The writing of Sidhwa is a unique blend of gender, society and culture which explores stark truth and reality of the society.

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