



Exploring the Challenges Faced by Women in Bapsi Sidhwa's 'Water'

S.M. Siva Mehala¹, S. Bharathi Sathiyadhas², T. Devi³, A. Sony Angeline Rose⁴

^{1,2,3,4} Assistant Professor, Department of Science and Humanities,
Annai Vailankanni College of Engineering

Abstract:

This paper delves into the intricate portrayal of women and the myriad challenges they face in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water*. Set in the socio-political landscape of colonial India in 1938, the narrative vividly depicts the harsh realities of widowhood, and the systemic marginalization endured by women. By conducting a close textual analysis, the study explores the intersection of gender, tradition, social stigma, and resistance, unravelling the multifaceted struggles that women confront within a deeply patriarchal and oppressive society. The analysis not only highlights the cultural and religious practices that contribute to their suffering but also examines the subtle acts of defiance that signify their resilience. This exploration provides a nuanced understanding of the ways in which these women navigate their constrained lives, offering critical insights into the broader discourse on gender and social justice.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchy, Widowhood, Social Stigma, Resistance, Colonial India, Bapsi Sidhwa, Women's Rights, Tradition, Oppression

Introduction:

Bapsi Sidhwa, a renowned Pakistani novelist, is celebrated for her profound exploration of social issues, particularly those affecting women in South Asia. Her novel *Water*, which is an adaptation of Deepa Mehta's film of the same name, provides a poignant portrayal of the lives of widows in colonial India. Set in 1938, during a time of significant political and social upheaval, the narrative offers a critical lens into the rigid and oppressive societal norms that dictated the lives of women, especially widows, who were often relegated to the fringes of society.

The novel is set against the backdrop of Varanasi, one of the oldest cities in India, where religious orthodoxy was deeply entrenched. Widows, according to the prevailing customs, were considered inauspicious and were often subjected to severe austerities, including confinement in ashrams or widow houses. Sidhwa's *Water* vividly brings to life the suffering, exploitation, and dehumanization that these women endured, while also highlighting their silent yet powerful resistance against such injustices.



This paper aims to explore the intricate challenges faced by these women, as portrayed in *Water*. Through a close reading of the text, the study will examine the intersection of gender, tradition, and social stigma, and how these forces work together to perpetuate a cycle of oppression. Furthermore, it will analyze the acts of defiance and resilience exhibited by the characters, shedding light on their struggle for identity and autonomy within a patriarchal society.

The structure of this paper is as follows: The first section will provide a detailed analysis of the social and cultural context of widowhood in colonial India, as depicted in the novel. The second section will explore the portrayal of key female characters and their interactions with the oppressive structures that govern their lives. The third section will discuss the themes of resistance and resilience, focusing on how the characters navigate their constrained existence. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the key findings and reflect on the broader implications of Sidhwa's narrative in the context of gender and social justice.

By focusing on these elements, this paper seeks to contribute to the existing body of literature on gender studies and postcolonial narratives, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by women in a historically marginalized position. As scholars have noted, the portrayal of women in colonial and postcolonial literature is crucial for understanding the complexities of gender relations in these societies. Sidhwa's *Water* is thus a significant text for examining the intersection of gender, tradition, and resistance in the face of systemic oppression.

Literature Review:

The scholarship surrounding Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* has extensively explored the novel's examination of gender dynamics, particularly within the context of colonial India. Scholars have focused on how Sidhwa critiques the patriarchal structures that shape and constrain the lives of women, especially widows, in this period. The existing literature highlights the novel's ability to shed light on the harsh realities faced by these women and the societal norms that perpetuate their marginalization.

Portrayal of Women in *Water*:

A key theme in the scholarship is the portrayal of women as victims of a deeply patriarchal society. Sidhwa uses her narrative to reveal the ways in which widows are dehumanized and stripped of their identities, reduced to symbols of misfortune and social burden. The novel's setting in colonial India amplifies these issues, as the rigid social norms of the time dictated strict codes of behavior for women, particularly those who had lost their husbands.

The depiction of the widows' ashram—a place where widows are confined and isolated from society—has been analyzed as a microcosm of the broader oppressive structures in Indian society. This space becomes a site of both physical and psychological confinement, where the women are subjected to austere living conditions, religious exploitation, and social exclusion.



Gender Dynamics and Patriarchy:

The novel's critique of patriarchy is another major focus of scholarly analysis. *Water* is often seen as a powerful commentary on the intersection of gender and power, where women's lives are tightly controlled by male-dominated religious and social institutions. This is particularly evident in the character of Madhumati, the head of the widow's ashram, who, despite being a woman, enforces the oppressive rules that keep the other women in a state of subjugation. This portrayal underscores the complex dynamics of internalized patriarchy, where women themselves can become enforcers of the very systems that oppress them.

Themes of Resistance and Agency:

Another significant area of focus in the literature is the theme of resistance and the limited agency available to the women in *Water*. While the novel predominantly portrays the widows as victims of their circumstances, it also highlights moments of resistance and defiance, however subtle they may be. These acts of resistance are crucial in understanding the ways in which these women navigate their constrained existence. The character of Chuyia, the young widow, is often discussed as a symbol of hope and change, representing the possibility of challenging and transforming oppressive traditions.

Social and Cultural Context:

Scholars have also examined the social and cultural context of widowhood in colonial India as depicted in *Water*. The novel provides a vivid depiction of the societal norms that dictated the treatment of widows, including the religious justifications for their isolation and mistreatment. The intersection of religion, tradition, and gender is a recurring theme in the analysis of the novel, with scholars noting how these elements work together to maintain the status quo and reinforce the subjugation of women.

The existing scholarship on Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* provides a rich and nuanced understanding of the novel's exploration of gender dynamics, particularly the challenges faced by women in colonial India. Through its portrayal of the harsh realities of widowhood, the novel offers a powerful critique of the patriarchal structures that continue to oppress women. The themes of resistance and agency, while less prominent, are essential to understanding the complex ways in which these women navigate their constrained lives. This literature review serves as a foundation for further exploration of the novel's contribution to discussions on gender, power, and social justice.

Historical Context:

In colonial India, the status of women, particularly widows, was deeply embedded in a complex web of social, cultural, and religious norms that perpetuated gender inequality. Traditional Hindu society was governed by patriarchal values, which dictated every aspect of a woman's life, from birth to death. The challenges faced by widows in this context were particularly severe, as they were subjected to some of the harshest forms of social exclusion and marginalization.



Status of Women in Colonial India:

Women in colonial India were generally considered subordinate to men, with their roles largely confined to the domestic sphere. They were expected to uphold the honour of their families by adhering to strict codes of conduct, which included modesty, obedience, and self-sacrifice. Education and economic independence for women were rare, and their lives were often dictated by the decisions of male family members.

Marriage was seen as the goal for women, and their identity was closely tied to their husbands. This dependency on male authority was institutionalized in various customs and rituals, which reinforced women's subordinate status in society.

Challenges Faced by Widows:

Widowhood was one of the most challenging experiences for women in traditional Hindu society. Upon the death of their husbands, widows were often seen as symbols of bad luck and were subjected to severe austerities. The practice of *sati*, where widows were expected to immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre, although officially banned by the British in 1829, lingered as a cultural memory that continued to influence the treatment of widows.

For those who survived their husbands, life was marked by strict social codes. Widows were often forced to shave their heads, wear white clothing, and live in seclusion, typically in ashrams or widow houses, where they led lives of extreme deprivation. They were forbidden from remarrying, participating in religious ceremonies, or even enjoying simple pleasures like wearing jewelry or eating certain foods. These restrictions were justified by religious texts and societal norms, which viewed widows as inauspicious and responsible for the death of their husbands.

The social stigma attached to widowhood further marginalized these women. They were frequently ostracized by their own families and communities, forced to live in isolation, and denied access to education or economic opportunities. This exclusion was not just physical but also psychological, as widows were made to internalize their "impurity" and "unworthiness." The lack of support systems often pushed widows into extreme poverty, making them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Cultural Norms and Gender Inequality:

The cultural norms that governed the treatment of widows were deeply rooted in Hindu religious traditions and the caste system. Texts such as the Manusmriti codified the inferior status of women and prescribed strict roles and duties for them, particularly in the context of widowhood. These norms were reinforced by the joint family system, where the patriarchal authority of the male head of the household was unquestioned.



Gender inequality was thus institutionalized in both religious and social practices. Women, especially widows, were denied autonomy and were subjected to the authority of male relatives or religious figures. The justification for such treatment was often couched in terms of preserving the purity and honor of the family and community, further entrenching the subjugation of women.

Marginalization and Resistance:

Despite these oppressive conditions, there were instances of resistance and reform. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar campaigned against the practice of *sati* and advocated for widow remarriage. The British colonial government, influenced by these reformist movements, enacted laws to improve the status of women, such as the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856. However, these legal reforms were often met with resistance from conservative elements within Indian society and had limited impact in changing deep-seated cultural attitudes.

The historical context of colonial India reveals a society where gender inequality was deeply entrenched, particularly for widows. The social and cultural norms of the time not only marginalized these women but also perpetuated a cycle of oppression that was difficult to break. Understanding this historical backdrop is crucial for analyzing the challenges faced by the women in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water*, as it provides insight into the societal forces that shaped their lives and dictated their fates.

Challenges Faced by Women in *Water*:

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* presents a stark and moving portrayal of the various challenges faced by women, particularly widows, in colonial India. The novel delves deeply into the lives of these marginalized women, highlighting the systemic injustices and social norms that constrain their existence. Through its characters and narrative, *Water* explores themes of social stigma, economic dependency, forced confinement, and limited agency, revealing the harsh realities that widows endured during this period.

Social Stigma:

One of the most pervasive challenges faced by widows in *Water* is the social stigma attached to their status. In traditional Hindu society, widows were often viewed as inauspicious and were blamed for their husbands' deaths. This stigmatization is vividly depicted in the novel, where widows are shunned by society and forced to live in isolation. For example, the character of Shakuntala, who is deeply religious, struggles with the internalized guilt and shame imposed upon her by societal norms. She is constantly reminded of her "polluted" status and is treated with disdain by others.

The social stigma also manifests in the way widows are excluded from participating in normal social activities. They are forbidden from attending celebrations, religious ceremonies, or even interacting with the broader community. This exclusion serves to reinforce their marginalization and perpetuates the cycle of discrimination against them.



Economic Dependency:

Economic dependency is another significant challenge for the widows in *Water*. Stripped of their husbands, these women are left without financial support or the means to sustain themselves. The novel portrays the economic vulnerability of widows, who are often left destitute and dependent on the charity of others or on the meager resources provided by the ashram where they live.

For instance, the character of Kalyani is forced into prostitution by the head of the ashram, Madhumati, to support the other widows. Kalyani's situation highlights the desperate measures that some widows are compelled to take in order to survive. Her economic exploitation is a direct consequence of the lack of opportunities and the rigid social structures that deny women any form of financial independence.

Forced Confinement:

The theme of forced confinement is central to the narrative of *Water*. Widows are sent to ashrams, where they are expected to live out the rest of their lives in austerity and isolation. These ashrams serve as prisons, confining the women physically and psychologically. The character of Chuyia, a young widow, is sent to the ashram after the death of her husband. Despite her young age, she is subjected to the same harsh treatment as the other widows, illustrating the indiscriminate nature of these practices.

The confinement also deprives the widows of any personal freedom or autonomy. They are not allowed to leave the ashram, interact with outsiders, or make decisions about their own lives. This forced isolation not only strips them of their dignity but also reinforces their marginalization from society.

Limited Agency:

The widows in *Water* are depicted as having very limited agency over their own lives. Their choices are dictated by the rigid social norms and the authoritarian figures who control their environment, such as Madhumati, who exerts tyrannical control over the other women in the ashram. The widows are expected to adhere to strict rules, with any deviation resulting in severe punishment or further ostracization.

However, the novel also highlights moments of resistance and subtle acts of defiance, where the women attempt to reclaim some form of agency. For example, Shakuntala questions the religious justifications for the treatment of widows, and Kalyani defies Madhumati by refusing to continue her life of exploitation. These acts, though limited, underscore the women's struggle to assert their dignity and challenge the oppressive structures that bind them.



Textual Evidence:

Throughout the novel, Sidhwa uses vivid descriptions and dialogue to convey the hardships faced by the widows. For instance, the ashram is described as a place of "darkness and silence, where life was drained away drop by drop" (Sidhwa, *Water*). This imagery emphasizes the suffocating environment in which the widows are forced to live. Kalyani's tragic fate—where she ultimately drowns herself in the river to escape her unbearable circumstances—serves as a powerful indictment of the societal norms that led to her despair.

Similarly, Chuyia's innocence and youth are contrasted with the harsh realities of widowhood, highlighting the cruelty of a system that punishes women for events beyond their control. The novel's ending, which leaves Chuyia's fate uncertain, underscores the pervasive and enduring nature of these challenges.

In *Water*, Bapsi Sidhwa provides a compelling and heartbreaking exploration of the challenges faced by women, especially widows, in colonial India. The themes of social stigma, economic dependency, forced confinement, and limited agency are intricately woven into the narrative, revealing the deep-seated injustices that these women endured. Through its characters and their stories, the novel not only critiques the oppressive social structures of the time but also offers a sobering reflection on the enduring struggle for gender equality and justice.

Character Analysis:

In *Water*, Bapsi Sidhwa crafts a poignant narrative around several key female characters, each of whom embodies the varied experiences, struggles, and resilience of women in colonial India. Through the characters of Chuyia, Kalyani, and Shakuntala, Sidhwa offers a deep exploration of the ways in which societal norms and gender dynamics shape the lives of women, particularly those who are marginalized and oppressed.

Chuyia:

Chuyia, the young child widow, is one of the central characters in *Water*. Her story is particularly tragic, as she is thrust into the harsh realities of widowhood at an incredibly young age. Chuyia's experiences in the ashram highlight the brutal indifference of a society that imposes the same austere restrictions on a child as it does on adult widows. Despite her age, Chuyia is expected to conform to the rigid norms of widowhood, including wearing white, shaving her head, and living a life of deprivation.

Chuyia's character is significant not only for the innocence and vulnerability she represents but also for her defiance and spirit. Unlike the other widows who have resigned themselves to their fate, Chuyia consistently questions the rules and expresses her desire to leave the ashram. Her resilience is evident in her refusal to accept her circumstances passively, and she often acts out in small but meaningful ways, challenging the authority of Madhumati and the oppressive norms of the ashram.



Chuyia's journey in the novel reflects the broader societal issue of how young girls are forced into adult roles and responsibilities, and how they resist and cope with the harsh realities imposed upon them.

Kalyani:

Kalyani is another pivotal character whose life story encapsulates the severe exploitation and vulnerability of widows. Unlike the other widows in the ashram, Kalyani is allowed to keep her hair long, a privilege granted by Madhumati because of Kalyani's role as the ashram's primary source of income through prostitution. Kalyani's beauty, which sets her apart, becomes both a blessing and a curse—it provides her with a certain status within the ashram, but also subjects her to extreme exploitation.

Kalyani's story is one of profound tragedy, as she struggles to find love and dignity in a world that continually dehumanizes her. Her relationship with Narayan, a young idealist who wishes to marry her, offers a brief glimpse of hope. However, societal norms and her past ultimately thwart their plans, leading to her despair. Kalyani's tragic end—her suicide by drowning—symbolizes the crushing weight of societal expectations and the limited avenues available to women who seek to escape their prescribed roles. Through Kalyani, Sidhwa critiques the intersection of beauty, exploitation, and gender dynamics in a patriarchal society.

Shakuntala:

Shakuntala is one of the most complex characters in *Water*. A devout and deeply religious widow, she initially appears to accept the norms of the ashram without question. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Shakuntala is internally conflicted about the treatment of widows and the religious justifications for their suffering. Her faith is challenged as she begins to see the contradictions and injustices inherent in the system.

Shakuntala's character is significant for her intellectual and emotional journey towards questioning the status quo. Unlike the other widows who have internalized their oppression, Shakuntala starts to question the fairness of their treatment and the validity of the religious doctrines that underpin it. Her gradual awakening is a key moment in the novel, as it represents a shift from passive acceptance to active contemplation and, eventually, to subtle forms of resistance. Shakuntala's story reflects the broader theme of how deeply ingrained beliefs can be challenged and transformed through critical reflection and empathy.

Resistance and Agency:

In *Water*, Bapsi Sidhwa presents several instances where female characters exhibit resistance and agency, challenging the societal norms and patriarchal oppression that dictate their lives. These acts of defiance, solidarity, and self-determination are crucial in understanding the characters' struggles and the potential for broader social change.



Acts of Defiance:

Chuyia, with her youthful innocence, often acts out in defiance of the oppressive rules of the ashram. Her refusal to conform quietly to the expectations placed upon her is a form of resistance, symbolizing the inherent human desire for freedom and autonomy. For example, Chuyia's refusal to shave her head and her attempts to escape the ashram are not just acts of rebellion, but a rejection of the identity imposed on her by society. These actions, although seemingly small, disrupt the rigid order of the ashram and challenge the legitimacy of its authority.

Kalyani's decision to pursue a relationship with Narayan is another significant act of defiance. In choosing love over the life of exploitation forced upon her, Kalyani challenges the societal norms that deny widows the right to remarry or seek personal happiness. Her resistance, however, is ultimately crushed by the weight of societal expectations, leading to her tragic end. Despite this, Kalyani's brief assertion of agency is a powerful statement against the dehumanizing treatment of widows.

Solidarity Among Women:

Solidarity is another form of resistance in *Water*. The bonds formed between the widows, particularly between Shakuntala and Chuyia, represent a collective strength that allows them to cope with their circumstances. Shakuntala, who initially adheres strictly to religious norms, gradually becomes a protector and mentor to Chuyia. This relationship demonstrates how solidarity among women can become a source of strength and a means of resisting the oppressive structures that seek to isolate and weaken them.

Shakuntala's growing awareness and her decision to take action on behalf of Chuyia by helping her escape the ashram is a profound act of resistance. It symbolizes a break from the passive acceptance of suffering and an embrace of agency, even within the confines of a deeply oppressive system. Shakuntala's actions suggest the possibility of change, not through grand gestures, but through small, compassionate acts of defiance.

Self-Determination:

The theme of self-determination is evident in the characters' attempts to assert control over their own lives, despite the overwhelming constraints placed upon them. For Chuyia, self-determination is expressed through her persistent efforts to return home and her refusal to accept the identity imposed on her as a widow. Kalyani's desire to marry Narayan and escape her life of exploitation is another form of self-determination, albeit one that is ultimately thwarted by societal norms.

Shakuntala's journey towards questioning the religious and societal norms that dictate her life is perhaps the most significant example of self-determination in the novel. Her growing realization that the doctrines she once accepted without question are deeply flawed leads her to take steps that challenge the status quo. By helping Chuyia escape, Shakuntala not only asserts her own agency but also disrupts the cycle of oppression that binds all the women in the ashram.



Implications for Broader Social Change:

The acts of resistance and agency depicted in *Water* have broader implications for social change. While the novel primarily focuses on the personal struggles of its characters, it also suggests that individual acts of defiance, when combined with solidarity and collective action, can challenge and potentially transform oppressive social structures. The characters' resistance, though limited in its immediate impact, points to the possibility of change and the importance of questioning and challenging the norms that perpetuate inequality and injustice.

In conclusion, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* offers a rich exploration of the challenges faced by women in colonial India, particularly widows. Through the characters of Chuyia, Kalyani, and Shakuntala, the novel highlights the pervasive nature of social stigma, economic dependency, and forced confinement, while also celebrating the moments of resistance and agency that offer a glimpse of hope and the potential for change. These themes not only reflect the historical realities of the time but also resonate with ongoing struggles for gender equality and social justice.

Conclusion:

This paper has explored the multifaceted challenges faced by women, particularly widows, in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water*. Through a close analysis of key characters such as Chuyia, Kalyani, and Shakuntala, it has been demonstrated how the novel vividly portrays the oppressive social and cultural norms that govern the lives of women in colonial India. These characters' experiences highlight the pervasive social stigma, economic dependency, forced confinement, and limited agency that widows endured, offering a powerful critique of the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality and social injustice.

One of the key findings of this analysis is the way Sidhwa uses her characters to illustrate both the suffering and the resilience of women in the face of systemic oppression. Chuyia's defiance, Kalyani's tragic struggle for love and dignity, and Shakuntala's gradual awakening to the injustices around her all serve to underscore the complexity of women's experiences in a deeply patriarchal society. These characters not only embody the harsh realities faced by widows but also represent the broader struggle for identity, autonomy, and justice that women continue to face.

The novel's portrayal of resistance and agency, particularly through the solidarity among women, offers a nuanced perspective on how change can be initiated even in the most oppressive circumstances. The small acts of defiance and the moments of self-determination depicted in *Water* suggest that resistance to patriarchal norms, while challenging, is possible and can lead to meaningful change.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* remains a significant literary work not only for its historical context but also for its enduring relevance to contemporary discussions about women's rights and empowerment. The novel's themes resonate with ongoing struggles against gender inequality, highlighting the need for continued advocacy and reform. As a critique of the social injustices faced by women, *Water* serves



as a reminder of the resilience and strength of women in the face of adversity, and it calls for a deeper understanding and commitment to gender equality in both historical and modern contexts.

Water is a powerful narrative that challenges readers to confront the harsh realities of gender inequality and to recognize the importance of empowering women in their quest for justice and dignity. Through its rich characterizations and its exploration of the social, cultural, and religious forces that shape women's lives, the novel offers a compelling critique of the systemic injustices that continue to affect women today.

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