Bapsi Sidhwa's Water: A Novel: The Widows in Subjugation, Revolt, and Jouissance

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Abstract
In this paper I will focus on Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water: A Novel* (2006), based on the film by Deepa Mehta. The film deals with the problematic theme of love and remarriage, but Sidhwa focuses more on the forbidden theme of widows' sexuality in a variety of ways. I will examine how she successfully shows that the widow's body is a space in which the contradictory meanings of her sexuality are exploited for the convenience of a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Widow, Sexuality, Religion, Forbidden Love

Introduction: Widows as the most Marginalized Beings

Indian writers give various voices to battered "husbandless" women living on "the margin of society" (*Difficult Daughters* 258). This "husbandlessness" is the key term, indicating how a woman is marginalized and becomes the victim of cruel violence. And among "husbandless" women, widows are the most marginalized beings, as seen in the tradition of forced suttee. According to Uma Chakravarti and Preeti Gill, editors of *Shadow Lives: Writing on Widowhood*, an anthology of laws, documents, personal narratives and fiction on widows between 500 BC and 1997, the widow is "denied of personhood" and is spoken of "as if she were a piece of stone" and referred to as "that" or "it" (Intro. 10). In short, the widow integrates all the discrimination against women in India, and many Indian novels describe battered widows.[1] Sunil Gangopadhyaya's *Shei Samai* [*Those Days*1997], for example, is a masterpiece about a young widow written in Bengali; it won the Sahitya Akademi award.[2] In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) we see women who lead wretched lives in an asylum in Benares. However, just a few English novels deal mainly with the issue of widows: Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), Aruna Chakravarti's *The Inheritors* (2004), Githa Hariharan's short novel "The Remains of the Feast" (1992) and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water: A Novel* (2006). In this paper I will focus on Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water: A Novel* (2006), based on the film by Deepa Mehta.

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[1] In *The Inheritors*, Radharani becomes a widow at the age of sixteen, suffers from mental illness because of her harsh life, and throws herself into a well. She is just one of many widows described in *The Inheritors*. Chakravarti goes on to portray the harsh lives and cruel fates of various widows of an old family which traces its lineage back to N. B. D. Sharma, and of families related to it, in a superb style of her own. Bharati Mukherjee, an American originally from Bengal, is known as a writer who tries to create "a new immigration literature," as she describes immigrants and women challenging traditional women's roles. Noticeably, *Jasmine* presents a protagonist who does not resign herself to her fate as a widow but takes action to change it. Jyoti, who is widowed at seventeen, decides to go alone to the U. S. without a job or money. Born in the village of Hasnapur in Punjab, she gets married to a liberated man who advises her to be educated to be a new woman (Jasmine is the name her husband gives her, meaning "a new woman"). He is involved in a terrorist attack by Sikh fundamentalists and is murdered. Thus, Jasmine is exposed to a society which discriminates against widows. Jyoti is bold enough to violate the traditional code for widows, which is a rare case among such downtrodden women. Jyoti's mother is also a widow, and the two live in an ashram, "the widow's dark hut" (96), a place they can keep company with other widows. Her mother had tried to throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre but was stopped by her daughters. She shaved her head, "wrapped her body in coarse cloth, and sat all day in a corner. Once a day I force-fed spoonfuls of rice gruel into her" (61). Thus, surviving means she experiences a living hell. On the other hand, Vimla, a girl from a wealthy family in the same village, whose father could give away a Maruti (a Japanese car) and a refrigerator in the dowry, and who enjoys the fanciest marriage ceremony the village had ever seen, also finds herself a widow when her husband dies of typhoid, and instead of enduring she embraces self-immolation: "At twenty-two she doused herself with kerosene and flung herself on a stove, shouting to the god of death, "Yama, bring me to you" (15). *Jasmine* shows how women become the victims of dowry murders, or are punished and abused because of their disobedience or barrenness. Mukherjee's story counters all this by focusing on a girl who smuggles herself into the United State to change her fate as a widow, thus challenging a society which discriminates against women and denies human rights to widows.

[2] Gangopadhyay's Bengali novel, *Those Days* tells a similar story of how a widow's body is abused. Bindu, the protagonist, is very intelligent with a great love of learning. She enjoys studying with Ganga, her playmate from infancy, but after being widowed, like other many women, she has become a captive in a rich man's harem. With difficulty Ganga finds Bindu who has been drugged, and persuades her to run away with him in vain. After telling him how she wants to kill herself, she hesitates, because she knows she is pregnant, but finally she leaps into the river.

"The Remains of the Feast" is a story of an old widow, who suddenly revolts against Brahmin culture by violating a food taboo. Unlike other stories of battered widowhood, Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast" does not tell how a Brahmin widow had been suffering, but her great grand-daughter's metaphorical rebirth as a narrator breaks the silence of the untold story of a Brahmin widow's life in the context of mother-and-daughter fiction. In this sense, Hariharan's narrative is very unique and subversive.[3]

Water: A Novel deals with the reality of widows in 1930s, and gives a detailed explanation of discriminatory practices and attitudes toward widows, which are still retained in a contemporary Indian society. On the other hand, "The Remains of the Feast" focuses more on the protagonist widow's revolt against patriarchal dominant Brahmanism in a contemporary Indian society in the context of a mother-and-daughter fiction. Rukmini, an old widow in "The Remains of the Feast" does not say anything about deprivation of her sexuality as a widow. On the other hand, *Water*: *A Novel*, which delineates the reality of widow's asexual life, clarifies what Rukmini's silence means, strengthening the significance of the widow's suppressed narrative which is told through her dying body.

Strikingly, Sidhwa focuses on the sexuality of widows in her novel. The film deals with the problematic theme of love and remarriage, but Sidhwa focuses more on the forbidden theme of widows' sexuality in a variety of ways. I will examine how she successfully shows that the widow's body is a space in which the contradictory meanings of her sexuality are exploited for the convenience of a patriarchal society.[4]

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[3] "The Remains of the Feast" is also a story of an old widow who suddenly revolts against Brahmin culture by violating a food taboo. What overwhelms us mostly here is not the body as an object of desire and hatred but the revolting body. A 90-year-old Brahmin woman, Rukumini, suddenly revolts against Brahmin culture by violating a food taboo. Her great granddaughter, Ratna, narrates all the details of the blissful moment when Rukumini deliberately deviates from the taboo and experiences the "Forbidden Fruit" (the original title of the first publication). Ratna's compassionate gaze at her great grandmother's hungry-ghost-like body constitutes the story of the rebellious body, the body of jouissance, fighting against the dominant culture in India, the source of the suppression of women. To violate a food taboo suggests that Rukumini rejects the passport to heaven this system guarantees to those who keep the rules codified in *The Laws of Manu* (5:4-5). Women's texts must be "subversive," says Helene Cixous in "Laugh of the Medusa," and Hariharan's text almost attains subversiveness, but this is reversed when the absent mother is transformed into a ghostly presence, a dominating voice, so that the daughter is cocooned in the deadly space of numbness. However, there is another turn of the screw, which entices us to reread from the ending toward the beginning, a cyclic rereading. Ratna airs the rooms at the ending, and the beginning follows the ending: "The room still smells of her." This text, in other words, forms a circle. Two key terms, "room" and "smell," lead us to a rereading. Though the room still smells of her, it is already "a dry, elusive smell, and "burnt" (9). Here begins again Ratna's narrative of her great grandmother's revolt, and the absent body is no longer the abject, but the source of the daughter's narrative, the female "voice." The lost object gives the daughter representational power, in an anti-Lacanian paradigm which sees the existence of women as the desiring subjects in the Symbolic order, and she tells the story of the rebellious maternal body and regains union with her through narrative. Ratna's rebirth as a narrator breaks the silence of the untold story of her great-grandmother's life, achieving a subversion in the very telling.

[4] To control the sexuality of women is necessary for sustaining the patriarchal system, a caste hierarchy convenient for Brahmins, and for controlling the system of inheritance rights convenient for men, according to Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, the authors of *Daughters of Independence*.

Water: A Novel: **Socially Ostracized Widows**

Now, I would like to look at how widows are represented in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water: A Novel*. It is faithful to the original, *Water* directed by Deepa Mehta and we can find the exact same words as in the film. However, Sidhwa often gives a good explanation of the reality of Indian widows, which is subtly suggested but not clarified in the movie. As Sara Suleri Goodyear states in a blurb on the book jacket, Sidhwa "provides speech [when] the film must leave the women speechless." Sidhwa also gives a voice to a child widow's mother (Chuiya's mother), who is absent from the film, thus creating a mother-and-daughter narrative, and she adds stories of some widows' pasts, which are impressive in their vividness, as they help us feel their individuality before they become widows.

Chakravarti and Gill refer to the controversy over the shooting of the film *Water*:

> [A]t the beginning of the 21st century Hindu men are still trying to deal with the emotions of guilt, fear and embarrassment evoked by the figure of the young widow. Why else should a film on Hindu widows, located in the 1930s, lead to such a strong reaction...? These men seem bent on the] recovery of the ancient greatness of the Hindus whose icon is the chaste sati, refusing to be a widow, capable mounting the pyre with a smile on her lips. The sati remains the essence of Hindu womanhood even as its practice has been banned since 1829. Since real widows, ekeing out a miserable existence in Varanasi, Mathura,...or in innumerable homes across the country, discriminated against and often subjected to violence, are a continuing presence in Hindu society, …. Widows must therefore be banished from the public sphere at any cost….However much one tries to erase the figure of the widow, she is very much there, especially in the social memory, as well as in the individual memories of most Hindu households—an aunt, a sister, a grandmother.…Was she exploited by us?(3)

Thus, the shooting of the film *Water* which deals with a young widow's tragic love evoked Hindu men's feelings of guilt and fear. Here I would like to focus on the reference to the widows' sexuality rather than on the suffering caused by the cruel prejudices and taboos which necessitate their "social ostracism" and "violence at the hands of relatives." Chakravarti and Gill say that widows are considered "sexually threatening" (3), yet it is the cruel reality of their social standing that attracts our concern. Strangely enough, their argument and the film *Water* do not clarify the way the widow is thought to be sexually threatening. This elusive vagueness seems to cause some difficulty for non-Indian audiences. Though the artistic subtlety of the film representation is in some ways praiseworthy, Sidhwa's novel clarifies that the widow is doubly cursed, burdened as she is with the evil image of voracious Eve. Let us look in more detail at how Sidhwa's novel describes this contradictory status of the widow's sexuality.

Contradictory Status of the Widow's Sexuality

Sidhwa's novel tells the story of Chuiya, a child widow, and of other widows around her who are sent to an ashram by a river in Rawalpur. The story is set in 1936, a year of radical change, when a law allowing widows to remarry had just been passed, and when Gandhi was leading a mass movement for freedom from British rule. Two

important figures console Chuiya in her homesickness, Kalyani, another young widow, and Shakuntala, a pious woman who plays the role of caring mother.

This is also a forbidden love story of Kalyani, which tragically ends with her suicide. Kalyani is the only widow who is permitted to avoid shaving her hair, that traditional humiliation which suggests the deprivation of femininity and sexuality. This means that Kalyani is placed in a position which isolates her from the other widows. She is sent to so-called clients, the Seths, across the river, by Madhumati, the boss of the ashram. She falls in love with Narayan, a liberated Hindu young man who supports Gandhi's views and leadership. However, on the way to his parent' house across the river, she learns that one of the clients is her lover's father. She finds no course of action other than committing suicide, because she cannot return to the ashram, which is no different from a whorehouse for her, nor can she "saddle Narayan's noble family with a daughter-in-law whose every living moment would bring disgrace and dishonour to their house" (176).

Chuiya's sexuality is also an important part of the story. After Kalyani's death, Madhumati, a bossy figure who manages an asylum for widows takes advantage of her ignorance and homesickness and sends her to a client's house. Shakuntala, who is frantically searching for the missing Chuiya, finds her on the boat with Gulabi, a hijura procuress. With fury and fear she realizes that Chuiya had been drugged, and with horror she realizes the brown patches on Chuiya's neck and calves are "congealed blood from cuts and wounds" (190). Shakuntala's faith has not wavered for many painful years, but Kalyani's death, Chuiya's abused body, and Gandhi's words, "Truth is God" instead of "God is truth" (196), which "hummed in her head," shake her convictions. Shakuntala decides to follow not her faith but her conscience and her love for the poor child. She makes frantic efforts to put her in Gandhi's care.

Through Shakuntala's doubts about the status of widows and the governing rules and taboos widows have to suffer, Sidhwa shows the problematic relationship between a woman's discrimination and her religion, or rather the tradition which benefits Brahmins "disguised as religion" (181), as Narayan puts it. Sidhwa gets to the heart of the problem of how a widow's sexuality is suppressed, or cursed, or abused for the convenience for men.

Narayan is disgusted with his father's hypocritical words: "Our holy texts say Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want, and the women they sleep with are *blessed* (italics mine, 174). He feels pity for his mother, who "*must have known of his tawdry infidelities: how could she tolerate them?*" (174). He also remembers what Rabindra, his friend, has pointed out, "the Seths of Rawalpur seemed to fancy widows" (174), suggesting that this is not a special case. What is contrary to logic is given an ironic charge as the subject of religion. The widow's body, which should be asexual, is assigned the role of a seduced body, full of voracious desires, and Narayan's father's selfish, unfaithful body is seen as possessing the power to bless the inauspicious widow's body.

We can also see how the widow's sexuality is abused through the story of the assaults Madhumati suffers after her husband's death. She is raped by her brothers-in-law for a week, and "shorn and beaten and taken twenty miles into the wilderness and discarded!" (70). Gulabi finds her "covered in blood and half-dead from starvation,

lying in a ditch on the edge of the forest" (70). With the help of the head of the ashram, Madhumati aborts "the foetus resulting from rape," but after two weeks she is taken to a "client" (71).

The widow is not permitted to wear ornaments and colourful saris. She also has to shave her head. In this way, her body is deprived of femininity and sexuality, being codified as an asexual being, or dehumanized nonbeing. However, this deprivation itself evokes a Brahmin man's "unnatural concern" or hypocritical desire. In fact, Rabindiran's father is indiscriminately interested in widows of all ages and physical appearances. Thus, the widow, whether she is young or not, is labelled as dangerous because it has power to allure men.

Substantial Bodies of Widows

Sidhwa also positively delineates the widow's body with power to allure men not only through Kalyani's but also through other widows' bodies. Sadananda, a priest who preaches widows, is "overwhelmed by their bodies, ripe beneath coarse, loosely-spun saris that stretched to accommodate each curve and dent of their desirable flesh" (78). Here we find not the shadowy widows' bodies but the substantial human bodies which cannot be annihilated by any suppressive system and laws. Sidhwa also leaves a clear message that a girl's self-chosen sexual maturity should not be hindered through Chuiya's mother's fury at her husband who decides to marry her daughter to an old man.

Conclusion

Indian writers and writers of Indian origin have tried to expose the cruel reality of the tragedy of widowhood in different ways. While they focus on the suppressed widows, Rabindranath Tagore challenges the taboo theme of widow's love and sexuality in *Binodini: A Novel* (1903). The title character is a widow who is indignant about the reality of a widow's life. She rebels against social conventions. She is not initially stereotyped as a dangerous woman because she is fearless and able, armed with keen insight. Her aspiration to love and her painful experiences are delineated in full detail. However, her way of obtaining love is finally seen as selfish and wicked.

Sidhwa more daringly deals with this taboo theme of widows' sexuality than the other writers. The widow is forced to live as an asexual being, however, Sidhwa positively delineates the widow's body with power to allure men. She also challenges to delineate the widow's body in jouissance through Kalyani's love, though it was aborted.

Sidhwa also successfully shows how the widow's body is a space in which the contradictory meanings of her sexuality are exploited for the convenience of a patriarchal Indian society. The widow's body is deprived of sexuality, being codified as an asexual being, and this deprivation itself evokes a Brahmin man's desire. The widow's untouchable body is, according to Narayan's father, "blessed" when she sleeps with a Brahmin man. Thus, his infidelity and desire for the tabooed body are justified from both social and religious perspectives. Sidhwa successfully makes this troublesome truth visible in her novel.

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