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Chuiya: The Unconventional Break in the Way of Becoming in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water*

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Abstract:

Bapsi Sidhwa, a novelist of Pakistan (now living in America), is one of the most prominent female writers of that time when feminist narratives were making its way in the literary canon. Her novel entitled “Water” which was published in 2006 made its mark in the Postcolonial feminist literary canon with its uncommon tale of the plight of widowhood in pre-Independent India. There is a strong tendency of dehumanizing the widows to such an extent that they are considered as asexual beings who are looked upon purposeless to serve the society. These purposeless, unproductive creatures (According to the opinion of the then society) are given the central position by Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel “Water” as she deliberately attempts to expose the real status of widows at such a time through her microcosmic representations of the living experiences of these widows which collectively stand for the entire widow community that lived as the marginal and tried to sustain themselves amidst those who are blind to their plights and even their existence. It seems to be a tale where the lives of the characters are all connected with each other and they stand as the emblem of different stages of womanhood, widowhood, oppression, indifference, pain and youth. All of their experiences had the traces of repression and subjugation because they were never allowed to express their identities and feelings freely. Chuiya, Kalyani and Bua form a circle that represents the life of a widow in the Hindu Society of the pre-independent era. But Shakuntala's helping hands and decision and Narayan's presence result into breaking that chain of becoming which would have brought the most probable ending to Chuiya's life. Chuiya comes as a storm which tries to break the boundaries which were set up the patriarchal society and make her own way to escape the marginalized existence. It feels like every part of the plot came up together to make way for Chuiya to dig her own passage of

escape. Chuiya is the point that challenges the centre to lead to the degeneration of the whole structure that pushed the widows towards the margins. Gandhian views and other liberal thoughts act as catalysts that generate the dynamics of the centre-margin conflict to manifest. Chuiya definitely breaks this cycle by neither becoming like Shakuntala, Madhumati and Kalyani and nor like Bua who resigned to her fate.

Keywords: Widowhood, Gandhian Philosophy, deconstruction, feminism, freedom, plight, becoming.

The Postcolonial discourse manifests its intentions of indulging with the stories of the margins by engaging with the narratives of individuals who had been systematically silenced in the oppressive, patriarchal and imperial culture. Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the most prominent female writers of that time when feminist narratives were making its way in the literary canon. Her novel entitled "Water" which was published in 2006 made its mark in the Postcolonial feminist literary canon with its uncommon tale of the plight of widowhood in pre-Independent India. The understanding of feminism and the female question in regard to the nations which had been exposed to the history of colonialism, is quite complex and thus an intersectional reading seems to be the best tool to unravel the layers of the existential reality of females. Being set in the pre-Independent India when the new ideologies in form of Gandhian philosophy was slowly entering into human consciousness and becoming comprehensible to all, Sidhwa's "Water" represents that dynamic social and mental space through the saga of widowhood. It is through the tale of a six-year-old child who is somewhat forced into widowhood that the writer tries to throw light at the story of becoming that is intertwined with Chuiya's practical experience as a female, a widow and a possible castaway or a liberal.

Widowhood in a Hindu tradition is a different story of marginalization where the centre not only abandons them indifferently but also denies their existence through repeated segregation which pushes them more towards the periphery to make them almost non-entities. There is a strong tendency of dehumanizing the widows to such an extent that they are considered as asexual beings who have no purpose to serve in the society. These purposeless, unproductive creatures are given central position by Sidhwa in her novel who deliberately attempts to expose the real status of widows at such a time through her microcosmic representations of the lived experiences of these widows which collectively stands for the entire widow community that

lived at the margins and tried to sustain themselves amidst those who are blind to their plights and even their existence. As the reader encounters each of the widows at the widow ashram at Rawalpur, they see the possible future of Chuiya in them. It is as if all those widows mirror Chuiya's story of becoming a woman who has been marked as a widow and has to go through a different experience of negotiating with her uncanny gender role in the marginal world. On the other hand, Chuiya mirrors the story of young and colorful past of all the widows who look at her with a kind of gaze which take their minds to the nostalgic memories. It seems to be a tale where the lives of the characters are all connected with each other and they stand as the emblem of different stages of womanhood, widowhood, oppression, indifference, pain and youth. It cannot be denied that women in India had always been considered as inferior to their male counterparts and the traditional ideas acted as chains that grasped them from all the sides to restrict their flight. All of their experiences had traces of repression and subjugation because they were never allowed to express their identities and feelings freely. As Beauvoir stated that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir 293), it brings to mind how systematic conditioning restrict women within gender roles that can benefit the males in a patriarchal society. Their purpose being child bearing and rearing reduced the status of women as a machine which only produces and continues the lineage. When Chuiya's father states that "a woman is recognized as a person only when she is one with her husband" and a "woman's role in life is to get married and have sons," the male-centric Hindu cultural values come to the forefront (Sidhwa, 8). Reflecting upon such a thought it becomes even clearer why widows were considered with even more indifference because flawed understanding of morality did not allow Hindus to consider these widows as machines to produce children rather, they were tools to satisfy male libido like the father of Narayan Seth Dwarkanath.

Plight of women in Indian society has been addressed by several writers of that time but Sidhwa's tale deserves special mention because of the choice of her subject which was mostly avoided and thus remained unexplored in the field of literatures. The tale of becoming a woman while living with the widows seem quite perplexing as Chuiya is utterly confused about gender roles and appearances when she first watches each of her fellow housemates at the ashram. Her innocent mind is unable to make sense of the conditionings that the widows were subjected to. That is the reason finding them with shaved head gave her the impression that these widows were males because "she was clearly puzzled...They were all women...Even the lantern-jawed,

flat-chested ones whom she had thought were men” (Sidhwa 81). Being a child, she was still at a stage when she was trying to make sense of the ideas of gender and the gender expectations that come with that. Her mind perceived human beings as equal individuals and not merely as men and women. This kind of understanding led her to ask Shakuntala “Didi, where is the house for the men?” (Sidhwa 81). She was unaware of the symbols or codes of gender that represented the expectations of society that everyone abided by. For her women had long hair while men kept their hair short and those women who had shaved head seemed like males to her. Widowhood had no separate significance to her because she was unaware of the social conditionings that drove the widows towards a painful existence. When she shared her wish of keeping long hair even after being a widow, it is understood that the significance of Kalyani's hair and the special treatment she got in the ashram made no sense to her.

Several stages and conditions of widowhood are portrayed in the text which provides the reader with the glimpse of the possible roles Chuiya might take as she grows up and negotiates with her conditions and her gender identity. For every stage of life there are representatives who mirror Chuiya's upcoming adulthood and her life in the ashram and existence as an outcast of the society. From one point of view the novel seems to narrate the story of becoming of this child who is sure to go through the same experiences that the women in this ashram have gone through. All of their stories are more or less same as they share same fate being born as a girl and conditioned to become that desirable being, who might please the men lust. There are similarities in the experiences of Bua with that of Chuiya to a great extent. Both of them remember their marriage as hazy glimpses of extravagant arrangements and “nothing more than an enticing offer of new clothes, delicacies, and an enviable opportunity to be the centre of attention” (Ilame, 922). Chuiya, Kalyani and Bua form a circle that represents the life of a widow in the Hind Society of the pre-Independence era. In all probability the character of Chuiya, the new member of the ashram would have taken after the role that Kalyani played before committing suicide and Madhumati's decision of sending her for prostitution stands as a hint to that. But Shakuntala's decision and Narayan's presence result into breaking that chain of becoming which would have brought the most probable ending to Chuiya's life. Either she would have died like Kalyani or would have met with a similar fate as Bua. Bua comes out as a character who had a life just like of Chuiya before she was sent to the ashram and that is the reason her child-like innocence complements that of Chuiya's naughty endeavors in breaking the laws of the ashram, revolting

against Madhumati or even indulging in delicacies that are forbidden to widows. Their existence is akin to that of the street animals which get food when the masters are pleased and normally lead a life full of indifference and disgust. They are marginalized for their gender and their widowhood irrespective to their age. That might be a reason why old widows like that of Bua resembled each other in their daily drudgery of suffering. None cared for them. Their children and other family members discarded them off like unnecessary baggage and put them in these ashrams where they had no other option but to wait for their death. This points to the truth that “Chuiya and old Bua together formed a complete circle of life, illustrating women oppression irrespective of their age” (Ilame,924). The tendency of perceiving the identity of women in reference to their male relatives drove the widows towards a marginalized life as without their husbands they had no identity and no right to survive with dignity and happiness. As Madhumati states “when our husbands die... the wives also half die”, the masculine culture and values of the society are highlighted (Sidhwa 42). This constant tendency of privileging the males over females made even widows to pray that “God willing, She’ll be reborn as a man” as Bua took her last breath (Sidhwa 114). The widows had to go through a vicious cycle of existence where their childhood memories increased their longing for family and pained her as they had no escape from the social structure that denied recognizing them as humans.

Chuiya crawling towards Shakuntala on her first day at ashram is an emblem of her predestined existence as a widow with no desire and full of blind faith in prejudiced notions of religion. As she crawls into the core of the ashram by discarding her momentary thoughts of rebellion, it is understood how situations forced the widows to accustom themselves into this life which has a static essence to it. Chuiya comes as a storm which tries to break free from the boundaries and make her own way to escape the marginalized existence. Although at several instances her indomitable spirit loses its luster at the face of gloomy instances, her fate acts like her namesake to help her get out of this vicious cycle where either the fate of Kalyani or that of Bua would have been the ultimate point of her cycle of being and the story of becoming. It is the advent of the new Gandhian philosophy that acts as a fresh air in the minds of some people and the lives of the widows. It is the true awakening of her consciousness that led Shakuntala to understand the new thoughts that were coming to the forefront as bright promises. Her blind faith in religion is questioned by Narayan who is liberal at heart and who sees things logically rather than getting trapped in the biased interpretations by people who act upon their own interest.

Every time reference of Gandhi and his thoughts are made, we find the structure of widowhood getting disrupted. It feels like every part of the plot came up together to make way for Chuiya to dig her own passage of escape. Chuiya makes other reconsider their beliefs through her pure innocent uttering. Her question about why widows can't marry or why there are no male widows, questions the conventions.

Chuiya is the point that challenges the centre to lead to the degeneration of the whole structure that pushed widows towards the margins. Gandhian views and other liberal thoughts act as catalysts that generate the dynamics of the centre-margin conflict to manifest. Kalyani had been compartmentalizing her emotions and pains of 'nocturnal calls until Chuiya arrives and she realizes how this innocent creature will also have to go through same tragedy. This realization made her question Madhumati "Then why did you send me across the river?" if "We must live in purity, to die in purity" (Sidhwa 144). Shakuntala also had to reconsider her blind faith in religion to ensure the safety and security of Chuiya. To her, Gandhi became the new God who could provide Chuiya the required amount of safety and that is the reason she pleaded Narayan to "Make sure she's in Gandhi-ji's care" (Sidhwa 198). So, her conventional God-centric thoughts found a new turn with the godlike figure of Gandhi who led the flow of new ideas that celebrated humanity and ensured equality. This is a true example of the degeneration of the central point because the initial thoughts of the characters in the novel about their life and society changed completely as the plot advanced and they faced the harsh truths about bias in tradition and culture. Every central figure is challenged. Be it Madhumati and Dwarkanath, every figure who are symbols of patriarchal power are challenged by the marginal; figures. Madhumati is a representative of patriarchy as she takes active part in exploiting the females by pimping Kalyani and even Chuiya to men. Through these representatives of patriarchy "Sidhwa has rightly conveyed the idea in *Water* that the women are the toys and puppets of the men in the patriarchal society with whom they play, break and cast away mercilessly" (Amanat, and Rehman, 27). Chuiya's transition from the stage of playing with dolls to looking "like a diminutive doll" beside her husband on the wedding day stands as an example for the metaphor of the doll that is used by Sidhwa to highlight upon the unfortunate plight of women who were reduced to the level of objects at the hands of men. They first play the role of an object that is handed over by the father to the husband and then they become the object of male desire as they grow up. If they deny such subjugation after their widowhood, they are raped and left in the forest like that of

Madhumati by own family members. Chuiya definitely breaks this cycle by neither becoming like Shakuntala, Madhumati and Kalyani and nor like Bua who resigned to her fate.

This is how Sidhwa traces the journey of widows in her novel. With the symbol of water, she tries to focus on the free-flowing nature of women who are forced to adjust into any situation and take a shape depending upon the structure that determines their boundaries. Widows like Kalyani, Shakuntala or Madhumati did what they were expected to do and abided by the social norms to lead a marginalized life. But Chuiya becomes the first person who dares to break the chain and instigate the urge within others to do the same by denying the gender roles that were assigned for shaping their doomed lives. It thus becomes true in reference to Sidhwa's novel that "female fiction written from a feminist perspective attempts to capture and debate the multiple aspects of female identity" (Khan et al., 15). It is the identity, the role and the structure that the writer tries to challenge to bring forth a change in dynamics in the centre-margin conflict and thus the projection of the plight of the widows give way to the representation of feminist voices.

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