



REPRESSIVE RELIGIOUS MORES: A GYNOCRITICAL STUDY OF BAPSIDHWA'S *THE CROW EATERS AND WATER*

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ABSTRACT



The Crow Eaters and Water focus on the diffused power of the culture and traditions of the society in which the characters live, and how the requirements and expectations of the society limit and direct women and how they should empower themselves. This paper captures the complexity of cultures of the Parsis and the Brahmins (of the pre-independent era) that Sidhwa, a Pakistani-Parsi-Punjabi writer, depicts in her novels *The Crow Eaters* and *Water* and analyses the female suffering against patriarchal structures. In this endeavour, the article pays special attention to how factors such as cultural beliefs, education, domestic violence, forced marriages, female body condemnation and denial of sexuality are socially constructed. The purpose of the paper is to interrogate, deconstruct and demystify gender stereotypes that are constructed by culture and religion to suppress, repress and oppress women.

Keywords: Parsis, Brahmins, Female Body, Feminine Sexuality.

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Culture initiates a recurring pattern of behaviour within specified frames. For example, in many countries, men enjoy more adult rights and privileges and women are not accorded the status of individuals in their own right. Sometimes, although some of these inequalities are weakened through legislation, discriminatory socio-cultural attitudes and values still prevail. Women are socialised to be subordinate rather than an independent being. In such a scenario, women play a role as agents of social reproduction rather than agents of change.

Bapsi Sidhwa, a Pakistani-Parsi-Punjabi writer and an active socialist is a novelist of worldwide repute. She is the first English writer in Pakistan to receive international acclaim. As there was no tradition either of women's literature or of English language literature in Pakistan, Sidhwa is considered a pioneer in both the fields. As she declares in an interview with Bachi Karkaria: "a Parsi first, then a Pakistani, specifically a Punjabi. I am a woman simply by gender. I don't feel American at all. My consolidated 3 P identity has enriched my writing" (qtd. in Singh 6). She believes that though a writer cannot change the ethos in society, she can present the facts in a realistic manner. That is how she presents the realistic pictures of Parsi and Brahmin cultures in her novels *The Crow Eaters* and *Water* respectively, and thus shows concern for the women within the culture.

When it comes to treatment based on gender, Sidhwa discusses the universality of the quandary of women. Parsi and Brahmin women perform their roles, both consciously and unconsciously, within social constraints to conform to the approved norms of their culture. Women's adaptations to oppression continue within the society that have victimized and dehumanized them, and the consequences are cumulative. Outspokenly feminist, Sidhwa's novels bring the attention of the readers to women's situation in Parsi and Brahmin cultures that are responsible for the exploitation of women. This paper captures the complexity of cultures of Parsi and Brahmin that Sidhwa depicts in her novels and analyses the female suffering against patriarchy.

It was not until 1978 that the first Pakistani-English boisterous novel *The Crow Eaters* offered a

rare spark of light. Sidhwa herself tells Montenegro in an interview,

"Since there are not so many books written in English launched it was quite a function. . . And there was a bomb threat which subsequently I realised was from a Parsi who felt very strongly about the book. It took me some more time to realize the turmoil the book had created within the community" (33).

The novel deals with the foibles of a community, full of paradoxes with an identity crisis caused by their minority status, and also the female suffering against patriarchy.

Water takes the readers to India of the 1930s, especially Pre-independent India, a time when widows were warehoused in ashrams, where they lived in poverty until death. Throughout the novel, Sidhwa exposes the cruelties of Hinduism against widows. Indo- American Arts Council quotes Sidhwa's words, "Besides being a gripping story, the plot deals with a subject close to my heart- that of the oppressive hold tradition has 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". Thus Sidhwa portrays the tradition and value system of the culture effectively and articulates the misery and wretchedness of the women who happen to be a part of such community.

Over centuries, women have been leading a life that has been maneuvered by the patriarchs. They have had their set behavioral roles in a pattern so designed by their biology and culture ever since childhood that it naturally leads to subordination of women. Rosi Braidotti claims, "...being a woman is always already there as the ontological precondition for my existential becoming a subject" (187). And the religious cultures like Parsi and Brahmin are in no way apart from following the contrived principles to women. Being a Parsi herself, Sidhwa has been a keen observer of the cultural practices of her community that resist women to attain their autonomy. The first woman character who is taken into consideration in the novel *The Crow Eaters* is Putli, a traditional housewife who is conceptualized by the culture with a philosophy that it is her relationship with her husband, children and



relatives that can make her complete and happy. Sidhwa writes: "Putli was content. She fulfilled herself in housework and in the care of her children and husband... Blissful in her knowledge, she would, over the years, produce seven children. From the joyous climax of conception to the delivery, Putli would enjoy it all" (23-24). Putli does not demonstrate to have any definite constructive plan, expectations, desires so as to raise her status in the society. Thus Parsi culture assigns women to give way to the stereotypes and accept them conveniently. Kamala Bhasin says, "Each society slowly transforms a male or female into a man or woman, into masculine and feminine, with different qualities, behavior patterns, roles, responsibilities, rights...unlike sex which is biological, the gender identities of women and men are psychologically and socially. . .which means historically and culturally determined" (2). In *Water*, Bhagya gives little importance to her daughter Chuyia. Since her male heirs are her permanent possession, she is more affectionate to her sons Prasad and Mohan and is proud of being a mother of two sons. "Bhagya never worried about her robust daughter and, scolding her for her playful and willful ways, plied her sturdy little body with work- fetch the water, carry the firewood, sweep the yard, feed the cow" (16). Her characterisation of Putli and Bhagya accounts for Sidhwa's sensitivity to raise the aspirations of women by bringing about realisation of the manacles of Parsi and Brahmin culture that bind women which they have to break.

Culture also tends to promote a spirited cooperation from conforming women to prepare the next line of generation for similar role play. Women ensure the continuity of the cultural rituals which strengthen roots. They live a sheltered, unvoiced, and undemanding life. Putli, therefore, considers it as her ultimate duty to check her daughter Jasmine who, she observes, trespasses the threshold of customs by preceding her husband when she walks down the steps. Putli, thus, plays an active role in maintaining the hierarchal system and keeping the order of the society. There is no doubt that the "family not merely mirrors the order in the state and educates its children to follow it, it also creates and constantly reinforces that order" (217), observes Lerner.

In India, Brahmin cultural practices are derived from religious scripts and it then forms people's lifestyles. These practices are about maintaining status and honour in the community. Sidhwa projects the typical recurring pattern of patriarchal society to the readers and depicts how women have internalised patriarchal thinking that has played a major role in subduing other women. Brahmin culture sees widows as unfortunate women as in the novel *Water*, "You are a widow, and yet you run around like you are an unmarried girl?" (73). It exemplifies how women play major roles to disrespect other women in Indian society. Kalyani loses her respect and dignity even among women because of her widowhood.

In Parsi and Brahmin culture, love is discouraged because stratification and lineage patterns are disrupted if love develops between mismatched couples. Thus arranged marriage serves to preserve the religious structure and establish political and economic linkages between families to help elders exercise family control and maintain the family property within the larger kin unit over generations. As Annis Pratt says, patriarchy creates for women an "enclosure through marriage" (37). Sidhwa hints at the problem of inter-community marriage in *The Crow Eaters*. Freddy like the majority in the Parsi community does not favour mixed marriage. Faredoon gets fierce when his fifteen year old son Yazdi tells him that he wants to marry his Anglo-Indian classmate, Rosy Watson. Faredoon tells him that his love is born out of pity and says she is a " 'mixed-breed mongrel' " (128). Defending her against his father's racial prejudice, Yazdi says, " 'What does it matter if she is not Parsi? What does it matter who her parents are ... she is a human being, isn't she? And a fine person. Better than any Parsi I've met' " (128). Sensing that his son's enthusiasm for the girl cannot be toned down by everyday exhortations, Freddy argues that they are the Parsis and Parsis are not allowed to marry outside their community because Zoroastrianism emphasises the need for preserving the ethnic purity. Faredoon tells his son Yazdi who is keen on marrying Rosy, "What kind of a heritage are you condemning your children to? They might look beautiful but they will be shells—empty and confused; misfits for generations to come" (128).



The fact that women are obsessed with the conventional ideas of marriages in Brahmin society is evident in the novel *Water* too. Bhagya does not rebel against her husband and she knows that marriage is the only protection for a woman even though it subjugates her. Without any hesitation, she is ready to give Chuyia as scapegoat in the name of marriage. To quote Adrienne Rich, "(w)oman identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality" (139). Sidhwa brings to the forefront the male chauvinistic religious culture that controls women, and more so, the widows. Chuyia's father Somnath tells " . . . 'A woman is recognised as a person only when she is one with her husband. Only then does she become a sumangali, an auspicious woman, and a saubhagyavati, a fortunate woman'. He tells that the wife has no recognized existence in the Brahmanical tradition." (14-15)

Not only arranged and mis-matched marriages are encompassed within religious institutions but also child marriages were practiced and the treatment meted out to women were unimaginable. The height of widowhood suppression is brought out by Spivak when she quotes P.V Kane:

In Bengal, (the fact that) the widow of a sonless member even in a joint Hindu family is entitled to practically the same rights over joint family property which her deceased husband would have had . . . must have frequently induced the surviving members to get rid of the widow by appealing at a most distressing hour to her devotion to and love for her husband. (qtd. in Spivak 300)

The web publication of BBC News Magazine by Angus Crawford reported that according to a survey about child marriage in 2012, "Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, with 20% of girls becoming wives before their 15th birthday, even though 18 is the minimum age allowed by law." Though many social reformers have fought against several social evils such as Sati, and child marriage, women are compelled to get married

when they have not been mentally or physically prepared. Some of the victims in *Water*, Chuyia, Kalyani, Patirajji, Shakuntala and Madhumati. Chuyia and Kalyani, are married at the age of six and Patirajji at seven.

In a widow's life, thinking of remarriage is a sin. Social activists struggle for widow remarriage, but some Brahmin men use their own interpretation of the scriptures to muzzle the idea. On the contrary, men are allowed to remarry, keep mistresses or visit prostitutes. The readers can see the ridiculousness of such beliefs in a Brahmin society. Beena Agarwal says that it is the "norms of the conventions of Brahmanism that were responsible for the humiliation of women" (62). Living in such a society, Kalyani, the widow-prostitute is condemned by everyone. In the translation of the Holy Text, The Laws of Manu, Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith say that a Brahmin widow has three options. First, "She should be long-suffering until death, self-restrained, and chaste, striving (to fulfill) the usurp and duty of women who have one husband" (115). Second, she can remarry her husband's brother. Third option is that she can burn herself in her husband's funeral pyre. In the Holy Texts of Hindus, the laws have been laid by men in such a way that there is no restriction for widowers. It is poignant to note that even women favour these laws. All the widows talk against Chuyia when she asks about the house for men widows:

'Where is the house for men widows?'. There was a stunned silence. Then pandemonium broke out. A chorus of scolding erupted from the shocked widows. 'Good God!' 'What a horrible thing to say!' 'God protect our man from such a fate!' 'May your tongue burn!' 'Pull out her tongue and throw it in the river.' 'I'll do it!' They shrieked like harpies'. (97- 98)

This exposes the hypocrisy and double standards of a society where men are allowed, on the one hand, to treat widows as objects of contempt and consequently consider them a taboo on society, but on the other hand, use them secretly to satiate their physical hunger.



Culture continues to impact negatively on feminine sexuality and grants that many specific sexual behaviours are acceptable for men but unacceptable for women. While discussing four theories about cultural suppression of female sexuality, Roy F. Baumeister and Jean M. Twenge have said, "Socializing influences such as parents, schools, peer groups, and legal forces have cooperated to alienate women from their own sexual desires and transform their (supposedly and relatively) sexually voracious appetites into a subdued remnant" (166). The modesty and purity associated with mother, and the virgin-whore mentality, might lead men to see sexual experimentation and enjoyment as an indecent activity with their wives, and cause them to turn away from their wives in favour of the less regulated company of prostitutes. Promilla Kapur says, "When it comes to sex, there is one standard for women and another for men. People consider a woman more sinful than man, if both indulge in pre-marital or extra-marital sex relations. There are double standards governed by the order of patriarchy" (193).

Sidhwa takes up this important issue that tends to mar the healthy development of a girl-child in Parsi religion, in the novel *The Crow Eaters*. The ignorance policy regarding any sort of sexual knowledge is practised so that the girl-child is not only pure, physically a virgin, but also innocent in mind and thought. Sidhwa suggests that "a gigantic conspiracy was practised by an entire society to keep its girls ridiculously 'innocent'. The wealthier the family, the more ignorant the daughters. This carefully nurtured ignorance had a high market value in the choice of a bride" (229). The girls are left to learn on their own by chance while the same cultural practice is ignored in case of young boys who tend to have a lot more premarital experience as is seen in case of Billy who ". . . visited the Hira Mandi girls three times, read the Kama Sutra and discussed sex with his friends in a sombre and illuminating exchange of detail" (230).

The denial of sexuality adversely affects either the psyche or the health of the women. Tanya's chastity and ignorance towards the fundamentals of sex affects her health and dire implications can be seen on her character. Since her

sexual cravings are unexplained, the social watchdogs ensure that it remains so. Her nocturnal weakness, her bed wetting can be seen as a consequence of the same. This ideal of innocence, an attribute of women is imposed on them due to cultural ideology.

The double standard in Indian culture regarding the suppression of female sexuality is observed in the novel *Water*. When Bhagya talks of Chuyia whether Hira Lal will be able to satisfy Chuyia's *svavahava* (a woman's lustful aspect), Somnath is shocked to hear such words from his wife. "Bhagya, overwhelmed by her husband's fury, knew she had overstepped her bounds" (15). The word "bounds" clearly shows that the double standard in Indian society has laid boundary for women as to how they should be and should not be. Somnath also thinks that his wife's words about their daughter's sexuality violate the Brahmin principles upon which his ideas of sanctity are based.

Feminist writers often raise their voice against the condemnation of female body by religious texts. The idea that the female body is contaminated is common to many religions. Sidhwa highlights a major aspect that accounts to demean female body in Parsi and Brahmin religion. Some of the customs in the religious culture are dismal and Sidhwa shows how a woman like Putli accepts her subordinate position. When menstruating or after childbirth, women may not go to the Hindu temple or the mosque and in some cases like Parsis, may not come into contact with others. This association of menstruation and the female body with something dirty and untouchable is treated in *The Crow Eaters*.

In *The Crow Eaters*, the mother in the house spends a few days of every month living alone in a cloistered room referred to only as "the other room" (69). To protect the other members of the family from her menstruating body, she has to stay away from them, and they have to be warned when she is going to the bathroom, so that her shadow might not accidentally fall on them while they are praying. Every Parsi family has 'the other room' in their house. However women in this community celebrate this autonomy and the mother in the house sees these days of untouchability as a holiday away from her duties in the family and paradoxically, as a way of achieving what Virginia Woolf called 'a room of one's



own'. Putli's visits to the other room, "a tiny windowless cubicle with an iron bedstead, an iron chair and a small steel table" (70) attributed to the contaminating potentialities of menstrual blood, is taken favourably by her as it is the only chance she exclusively has for her own self.

The fact that female body is under threat in Brahmin culture is obvious from the following incidents in *Water*. "The other room" has a place in *Water* too. During menstruation period, women are treated as impure and polluted human beings by the Brahmin society. They are not permitted to go to temples or weddings. The Brahmin men have a common notion that the presence of menstruating women will defile the holy places like temples. In Chuyia's wedding, menstruating women are not allowed inside the temple. "Since the presence of menstruating women would defile the wedding and pollute the temple, food would be left for them at their doors" (26).

Menstruation is manifested as impure and accursed thus forcing women to be segregated during the state of impurity. As stated by Julia Kristeva, the menstrual blood is a typical example of the pre-lingual notion of the "abject,": "(It) stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference" (71). The abjection of women's menstrual blood by the dominant patriarchal ideology is out of male necessity to expel the feminine threat the blood represents. According to Kristeva, women's menstrual blood reminds men of the violent and chaotic distortion they have been through at birth. For the males, the idea that once in their lives they were embedded in their mothers' body and controlled by the maternal power frightens them and it must be dispelled in order to assert male subjectivity. In other words, men's dread of the female body and their refusal to acknowledge their maternal origin is determined by a fear of the splitting subject and the confusion of identities. Sidhwa rightly points out the treatment a woman receives and the superstition attached with it, in the novel *The Crow Eaters*: "Thither they are banished for the duration of their unholy state. Even the sun,

moon and stars are defiled by her impure gaze, according to a superstition which has its source in primitive man's fear of blood" (70). An argument among feminists is that if menstruation is normal, women should face it as a natural phenomenon, and should not shy away from the world. They can gain strength learning about various cultures wherein menstruating women were considered sacred and powerful.

Parsi and Brahmin culture can be called patriarchal due to the elevation of male privilege and its harsh treatment of women justified in the name of cultural traditions and religion. Sidhwa's experience of living in different countries has enriched her understanding of social issues concerning women under various religious societies. *The Crow Eaters* and *Water* focus on the diffused power of the traditions in religious cultures in which the characters live, and show how the requirements and expectations of repressive religious forces limit, direct and define women. The author captures the female figures in their entire complexity against Parsi and Brahmin cultures, and attempts to deconstruct and demystify gender stereotypes. This attempt of Sidhwa will go a long way in empowering women. As Manu wrote in the year 200 B. C., "Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased; but where they are dishonored, no sacred rite yields reward." The methodology used for presenting the arguments and findings, is in accordance with *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (Seventh Edition).

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