



WOMAN AND GENDER IDENTITY IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S NOVELS: A RETROSPECT

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Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa was one of the well-known woman writer and social activist. Being a woman, Bapsi Sidhwa struggled to empower women and tried to give them identity and equality in all spheres of life. Sidhwa has highlighted woman world in detailed through her novels. As a writer of women, Sidhwa has minutely studied and presented the women strength and weaknesses. Sidhwa's all the novels are women centered. The novels very well expose the patriarchy (Male domination) and women exploitation. According to Sidhwa, the women's position is considered as other, secondary, and marginal. The protagonists of Sidhwa have raised the voice against the social discrimination, injustices to women, ill-treatment and tortures to women and widow position in the male dominated society.

Keywords

Woman, Society, Object, Victim, Identity, Patriarchy, Partition, Injustice, Misery, Discrimination, etc.

Full Article

Bapsi Sidhwa was known as a writer of women. Being a woman, Sidhwa has experienced the discrimination from her childhood to the matured state. Sidhwa was paralyzed in her childhood so she has to depend on others. As a girl child parents and relatives has opposed her higher education saying that what she will do by taking education. On the other hand her brother has every privilege. Sidhwa has thus observed the surrounding atmosphere; society's treatment to women and women's position in society. As a writer and woman, Sidhwa centers herself in the novels and she considers women's position means to take the family and home.

Sidhwa's protagonists draw the attention on gender identity, equality and discrimination. The protagonists like Chuyia in the novel Water, Lenny in Ice-Candy-Man, Feroza in An American Brat and Zaitoon in The Pakistani Bride very well expose the dark reality and mentality of the society and people respectively. As per the customs, traditions and social norms the fate of women in the novel in general and in the society in particular is the pre-fixed. The women protagonist like Chuyia in the novel Water has exposed the social discrimination and treatment to women in society by asking the male widow house. The representation of Chuyia and her voice against the system is tradition breaking and revolutionary. According to Sidhwa women have to face every torture while



living with the husband and after his death. The death of the husband means the death of women at various levels.

The novel *Water* depicts the widow's life in Banaras and their pitiable condition in the widow house. The child protagonist Chuyia married at the age of six to the forty four years old Hiralal. Chuyia's father was happy about the marriage because Hiralal was against dowry and he has no mother. Being a father and human being, Somnath, Chuyia's father couldn't understand the age difference and so on. On the other hand Chuyia's mother Bhagya was against the mismatch marriage and tried to stop it but failed. In the male dominated society women's voices have no consideration and value. Being a woman and mother Bhagya sees the daughter's dark future but her concern has no value. In the short period of time Hiralal became ill and died. Chuyia, a young child became widow and sent to the widow house at Banaras. Chuyia was innocent and there was no fault of her own. She became the victim of patriarchy, social customs and traditions and accepts the reality. Besides Chuyia, there were twenty widows from eight to eighty have to depend on begging and entertaining the upper class men.

According to Sidhwa, society considers women as object, marginal, secondary and so on. The social norms and rigid tradition are responsible for women victimization. The women in male dominated world are only sex objects meant for use and exploitation. Women are considered an object, a thing of pleasure and entertainment. Lenny, the child protagonist in the novel *Ice-Candy-Man* recognized the social pattern and the multifaceted partition trauma in which only women of both the sides suffered. During Partition women have faced the extreme violence and multiple identities and experiences like force migration, rape, marriage and force marriage and force to accept other religions and so on.

The women in male dominated society have no power of decision making, education, choosing partner and create their own identity. During partition many women became the victim of rival community people and they have brutally exploited them, forced to marry with them. As a result of this many people have rejected them and not allowed to enter their own homes. Many women have accepted the situation, married and decided to live with the other religious men. Male domination has showed to the world that women have no home and right in husband's property and no return entry at father's home too. The women who have exploited and place to stay are allowed to stay in the refugee camp where they are labeled as fallen women. Many fallen women were in search of help but nobody comes to help. Thus, women's position was pitiable and women were helpless from all sides.

According to Sidhwa, women were the worst sufferers in partition of all the sides. Firstly they are violated by the men of the rival community and secondly by their own men who for the sake of one's own honor rejected them. The Muslim, Sikh and Hindu's each community men try to show their communal power by exercising on the other religious women. Only women of all the sides were targeted during partition. Bapsi Sidhwa has tried well to focus on the marginal position of women. According to Sidhwa, it is writing about women's humiliation, dignity and exploitation. Sexual violation of women is the center of men of each community. Women suffered a lot during partition as they were mothers, daughters and daughter-in-laws. The 1947 Partition has witnessed the extreme violation of women. Women forced into prostitution. Ayah (Shanta) in *Ice-Candy-Man* was forced into prostitution and later forced to marry Muslim. The loss of identity and rootlessness were the prime features of partition.



Being a woman, writer and social activist Bapsi Sidhwa has very well portrayed the woman characters and their sufferings through her novels. According to Sidhwa, the writing and the voices of women compel the reader to bring gender equality and break the tradition. The men and women are equal by birth and there is no superiority and inferiority among sexes. The writing also highlights the issues like Widow System and Child Marriage through the novel *Water*. As a woman, Sidhwa tells women to fight and raise voices against injustice, exploitation and oppression as these are the obstacles in their development. Apart from all that, Sidhwa's novels presents true picture of society and urge for gender equality.

Sidhwa has tried at her level best to spread awareness about the gender equality through her novels and interviews. As a writer, she got international fame as a woman writer. In the male dominated society Man's work is quantified while woman's work, like kitchen maintenance, childbearing, childrearing has no value. The work of men is measurable and considered worthy and superior while woman's work is considered as valueless and inferior. The status of women is mainly marginal and assigned work is also uncountable. Besides the male domination and patriarchy, Religion also plays a crucial role in determining the position of women in society. Religion is the main cause of women's misery and secondary position. All religions treat women as inferior to men and the historical silence also responsible for women's sufferings and position.

Thus, Sidhwa's writing highlights universal fact and appeals to all the readers. According to Sidhwa, the women status from history to contemporary time is the same. Being a woman, Sidhwa's novels are gynocentric which portray the predicament of women in socio-cultural, religious and political contexts. Sidhwa's novels depict the real picture of society through the women characters like Ayah (Shanta), Hamida, Chuyia, Feroza and so on. By and large, it's true and proved that Bapsi Sidhwa was a great human being, supreme soul and a gifted novelist who has exposed true women sufferings and predicaments.

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