

Ostracism and Violence against Women: A Comparative Study of *Blasphemy* and *Water*

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Abstract. Men and women are uniformly efficient to carry out social and practical roles at any level but several times they fail to act prudently. Indeed, a woman cannot avoid the reality that she belongs to weaker section, because society has constructed rigid models for her and has labeled woman variously. Feminists have recognised the element of gender-based favouritism a root cause of women's slanderous status in the hierarchical order of most of the civilizations. Few centuries back, because of many social and cultural traditions that were specially created for women's physical and psychological repression, they did not have authority to think and act without any hindrance. They had to go through many cataclysms to enter the intellectual world. Many South Asian female writers have explored subjectivity through their writings in order to establish their own identity. Bapsi Sidhwa and Tehmina Durrani identify culture specific practices such as, child marriage, dowry, polygamy, honour-based crimes, marital rape, prostitution, widowhood, ostracism of women because of so called religious faith as primary sources of patriarchal power that marred woman's selfhood. Both the novels, *Blasphemy* and *Water* are completely different from each other in the way they portray people from different geographical regions, different social groups and different religions. But surprisingly these novels share common themes when it comes to depiction of the predicament of women. The paper explores both the violent and profound ways in which patriarchy restrains female of our society. *Blasphemy* locates all its actions in rural Pakistan, focusing on the life of Pir Sains' wife, confined to a certain portion of house, devoted only to household works. Durrani uses her novel as a mean of exposing the hypocrisy of Muslim clergyman and cruel nature of husband in particular. Whereas, Bapsi Sidhwa has very realistically delineated the plight and exploitation of Hindu widows in our male-dominated society. *Water: A Novel* is all about the Indian widows from the time of freedom and how they were made to live in a very filthy condition in the widow's Ashram.

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Since ages, women have been living under men's subjugation and their sensibility has changed under the influence of patriarchal standards. Our history has witnessed the adversities that womenfolk have been through. In the beginning of their struggle against masculine norm and taboos, women had to gather their strength to react against it but gradually they not only reacted against it but revolted too and eventually they made their own models and standards. They understand the power of liberty and know how to liberate themselves. Their past had been eclipsed by their annihilation but now they have enough courage to change their present and

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future. Now women are able to live their own life and free to take their own decisions. After having lived in the forlorn situation status for so long gradually they are moving towards radiance slowly and strongly. Feminism in its literary sense is the physical and mental liberation of women from the shackle of traditions that are meant to enslave them. Since time immemorial in the world, particularly in South Asian countries social custom and creeds have over all control of men. Feminism has not only liberated women to experience the world from their perspective but to show the world their aspects too. Many contemporary writers like Bapsi Sidhwa and Tehmina Durrani have envisioned the plight of women based on caste, creed, religion and gender and are trying to connote some pragmatic solutions to them. Their novels are basically voices from women hoisted in awareness against the exploitations at the hand of men. *Water* and *Blasphemy* are the outcry against the misuse of religious traditions to legalise violence against women and to give fatal blow to their existence as individuals. Their recognition has been limited to their relation to men to whom they belong. We can label our society patriarchal because male has privilege over female and they take it as an opportunity to prove their dominance. They use religion, tradition, culture and social norms as tools to abuse women. In our society men are treated with respect, dignity and worth from their birth whereas, women have to struggle all through their life to earn these qualities. Women have been struggling to prove their worth as equally deserving members of the society, capable of doing those things that even men cannot able to perform. Regarding the role of feminism in literature Miti Pandey asserts:

Feminism in literature describes a method that approaches a text with foremost concern for feminine experience in it. The experience based on fictional characters shows the rational, institutional or imaginative capacity of an author. The experience implied in language of structure that interrogates the cultural prescriptions, that subordinate and trivialise women and treat them as inferiors are the primary concerns of female fiction writers from feminist perspective. (Pandey,1)

Bapsi Sidhwa and Tehmina Durrani are among those writers who are well aware of the responsibilities they are burdened with for being a writer, inspiration and torchbearer for their readers and the society they live in. Both the writers have started writing to give a purposeful direction to society and have a dream to create a culture of equality which is free from dominance and hierarchy. Both of them picked up some significant incidents from their own lives or the lives of those who came in contact with them and used that information to create a large reality of fiction. *Water: A Novel*, a masterpiece of art by Sidhwa is based on the movie of the same name by Deepa Mehta. When Indian government banned that movie, Deepa Mehta who is a close friend of Sidhwa, has sent the script of movie

to her and has requested her to write a novel to reach out larger section of people. Sidhwa has used all her experiences to expose the cruelties of inhuman nature of traditional practices against women in the name of religion. In this novel she tried to expose exploitation of widows by rich Brahmins who are well aware of religious scriptures and use it against women. Here it is very important to take in account that she is not rejecting any religion as a respectable religion. She is merely trying to raise the right questions regarding brutal traditions. It is very clear that all religions are almost perfect but the devotees of those religions have their own share of misinterpretations like Pir Sain in the novel of Tehmina Durrani. Every religion is very much affected by its chauvinistic interpretation whether it is Hinduism or Islam or any other religion.

Water and *Blasphemy* are the tales of misuse of masculine power with the help of religious distortion over women and deep rooted indifference, stoicism and violence lurking in our society. Both the novelists have fearlessly attacked on the hypocrisy of the patriarchal traditions that has developed over thousands of years. Large part of the novel *Water* describes the exploitation of widows by those people who have strong hold in society and who drag them into prostitution. Sidhwa has very skilfully raised the most controversial issues like patriarchy, religious distortion, corruption in Ashram and child marriage. She tries to demonstrate her point of view through three main characters of the novel, all of them are widows, first one is Chuyia, a six year old child widow, second one is Kalyani, a very beautiful young widow who dares to love Narayan and third one is Shakuntala, a staunch believer and educated widow. The novel starts with Chuyia, whose life changes abruptly after marriage with Hiralal, a 44 year old widower. Somnath, who is himself a priest has supported child marriage of her own daughter, tried to shut her wife up through his religious knowledge in an authoritative quotes from Shastra:

"In Brahmanical tradition," said Somnath, in an authoritative tone, "a woman has her entity as a person only when she is one with a husband. Only then does she become a sumangali, an auspicious woman, and a *saubhagyyavati*, a fortunate woman." He further asserts that a woman's body is a site for conflict between a demonic stri-svavahava, which is her lustful aspect, and her stri-dharma, which is her womanly duty.(Sidhwa, 14)

Ironically we know that all male power comes from the womanhood but nobody has any respect for women. They always use this power against women and most of the time to silence them. Chuyia who hardly has any memory of her marriage, is forced to travel with her near to death husband to Varanasi, where, later he died and cremated at the bank of Ganga. A girl in a very gentle age of six years was compelled to follow rules made for widows by removing her marriage

markers, her red and green bangles and mangalsutara. She had to drape herself in a filthy homespun white cloth because widows were not allowed to wear stitched dress or any colourful or new dress. Her father who is a misoneist despite protecting her, left her at the doorstep of the ashram, there she must lead a shameful life of penance until her death. According to the society for the vicissitude of fate only women are responsible that's why for widowhood Chuhiya got punishment. The women under societal pressure self- immolate themselves. Without support of their family members at a very young age they are unable to preserve their dignity and thus are forced to take refuge under the vidhwa ashram. A six year old child who doesn't even know the meaning of life, yet forced to live a life of ostracism and violence. The brutality of our tradition is that the right of existence of Chuhiya as a normal human being is snatched from her all because of the sudden death of her husband she barely knows. According to Somnath:

Outside of marriage the wife has no recognized existence in our tradition. A woman's role in life is to get married and have sons. That is why she is created: to have sons! That is all! (15)

Somanth, a conventional person tries to show his wife's status of a woman according to religious texts. It is clear from the above statement that a woman doesn't have any individuality other than being in relation with man. Our society has always been harsh in the treatment of widows, rape victims, single mother etc. Chuhiya's mother though numbed with sorrow knows very well :

...in Brahmanical culture, once widowed, a woman was deprived of her useful function in society- that of reproducing and fulfilling her duties to her husband. She ceased to exist as person; she was no longer either daughter or daughter-in-law. There was no place for her in the community, and she was viewed as a threat to society. A woman's sexuality and fertility, which was so valuable to her husband in his life time, was converted upon his death into a potential danger to the morality of the community. (32)

In our culture widowhood is a state of social death of victims. They are not allowed to live a normal life, they cannot eat hot and tasty food. They are forced to sleep on dirty floor, have no source of income other than begging. Even among the higher castes widows have the similar condition as in lower castes the reason behind miserable status of widows is that they are considered to be responsible for their husband's death. In the ashram widows are ordered to reduce their attractiveness by restricting them from wearing the normal clothes and having their heads shaven because their sexuality is treated as the threat for the morality of society :

It was enforced by belief that if the widow did not shave her head, every drop of water that fell upon the hair polluted the husband's soul as many times as the number of hairs upon her head. (44)

This atrocious alteration of Chuyia's personality leads towards her social death. Her complete detachment from old ties marks the beginning of the miserable life that awaits her in the destitute widow's house. Sidhwa shows the harsh reality of widow's Ashram, highlighting the fact that in this patriarchal system women are victims of violence and inhumanity. In the ashram Chuyia including other widows are controlled by Madhumati, a corrupt and soulless character whose every word is law in the ashram. She tells Chuyia:

"Holy book says, 'A wife is part of her husband while he is alive.' Right?... And when our husband dies, God helps us, the wives also half die...So how can a poor half-dead woman feel any pain?" she asked not really expecting any answer. (52-53)
Chuyia, teras still slipping down her face, raised her head, and in between sniffles, replied with a child's innocent logic, "because she's half alive?" (53)

Chuyia is too young to carry the burden of orthodox tradition and is unwilling to surrender to the circumstances. She made a strong connection with Kalyani, the young and very beautiful widow who is forced into prostitution by Madhumati, who runs the side business of prostitution with the help of an eunuch. Shakuntala, an educated widow has courage to question the age-old tradition, a mother figure to Chuiya. Shakuntala always tries to understand ambivalence of religious traditions that always give upper hand to men over women. In Brahmanical tradition a woman is recognised as a person only when she is with her husband but the same thing is not applicable to men. Patriarchy gives men privilege to remarry, keep mistress or visit prostitutes whereas women are deprived of even their basic rights. Narayan's father in the novel justifies this inequality:

...our holy texts say Brahmin can sleep with whomever they want, and the women they sleep with are blessed. (201)

Basically, Sidhwa exposes the hypocrisy and double standard of Indian society in 1930s, specially in the context of the unfortunate widows. And to be very honest Sidhwa does not fail to frame the plight of widows in its right context. Following the path of Sidhwa, Tehmina Durrani too, tried to unveil the misuse of religion by the Muslim clergy men. Her novel is an enticing fusion of fact and fiction that exposes the Pakistani religious persons and Muslim religious groups that exploit Muslim majority under the guise of Islamic religious traditions. It also throws light on the veiling and segregation practices in rural Pakistan. Durrani

is feasibly the first woman in the Islamic world from South Asia who has attacked on the misuse of religion by a clergy man. She has shown that how people twist religious saying for their benefit. *Blasphemy* is the narrative of the suffering of Heer, Durrani's protagonist, at the hand of her husband Pir Sain, who is a brutal and corrupt man but always considers himself as a man of God. Heer was married to Pir Sain at the age of fifteen. He was so fascinated by her beauty that when he saw her with her mother, who came to Pir to seek his blessings, he decided to marry her at any cost. Although, being much older than Heer he made her his third wife. Pir married her because he was allured by her beauty but never loved her. He made her his slave and compelled her to do those deeds she never dreamt of. Heer followed her as a mute spectator but he never respected her as his wife or the mother of his children.

Heer happened to be an exquisitely beautiful girl with her own dream of higher education, love and a future with Ranjha. But after her forced marriage with Pir, throughout her life she was humiliated and was rejected. She suffered twenty four years of all sorts of abuses, successive rapes, regular violence and beating, twisted Islamic distortions, sexual perversions and a sadistically battered life. At one time she was in great dilemma when on the one hand she had to protect her growing daughters from their father's incestuous lust by pimping out orphan girl Yathimiri, widow's daughter and several other innocent girls. At one point shattered Heer says:

To me my husband was my son's murderer. He was also my daughter's molester. A parasite nibbling on the Holy Book, he was Lucifer, holding me by the throat and driving me to sin every night... He was the rapist of orphans and the fiend that fed on the weak. But over and above all this, he was known to be the man closest to Allah, the one who could reach him and save us. (Durrani, 143)

In Pir's coercion Heer has to live a life of absolute purdah and complete confinement within four walls of Haveli along with her mother-in-law and other females and maids. She lived under the complete subjugation of Pir Sain without any companion or access to external world. She was compelled to sacrifice her love, emotions, desires, freedom, identity, education and even her family because of Pir Sain. Ironically she was forced for this marriage by her mother in order to ensure wealth and happiness for the rest of her family. But contrary to the wishes of her family they never enjoyed the happiness even after losing Heer. She was forced to live a secluded life. A lady was appointed to keep her every single activity under surveillance and to report Pir Sain about her every mistake so that Pir Sain could torture her as much as he wanted.

Heer is not the solitary person who has been exploited by Pir Sain but he played with other people of the society too. As they come for spiritual guidance to him they think that he is their best well-wisher to lead them to Islamic ways of life, but in reality he is not a spiritual model to be followed but an incarnation of devil and a religious parasite. Pir Sain is a sexual lecher and cannot be satisfied with one woman but still he is a man of God in the eyes of people and was worshipped by them because they were ignorant about his evil nature. He enjoyed a high status and excessive honour in his life and never suffered on any ground. Durrani has very successfully exposed how womenfolk are being polluted under the guise of religious cloak. There are many characters in the novel who irrespective of male and female suffered at the hands of Pir Sain who made them feel helpless and vulnerable in his dangerous state. Pir Sain is a nymphomaniac who not only gets pleasure by being a part of sexual torture of women but also used to watch women getting tortured by other men. Women have faced abuse and violence and deceit from men for ages, still they haven't stop trusting them or being with them.

Haveli of Pir Sain is controlled by him where women are constantly abused, tormented and compelled to compete amongst themselves and even sacrifice others to save their own bodies. Heer was repeatedly abused and raped by him, and was forced to sleep with many strange men while he was directing, repeating orders and arranging their bodies for numerous session of pornographic filming. He forcibly intoxicates Heer and other young girls only to paralyse them for a short while so that they can be tormented easily. In captivity of her husband Heer finds herself trapped and her body being corrupted to the level of prostitution or pimping young girls or including orgies only keep herself alive. All these things are done by the Pir himself, who claimed to be the intermediary between God and the people; he sits and watches like an emperor at a show. Fueled by this gross religious defamation through perverted whims of Pir Sain, she wants to get rid of him permanently:

Contemplating the murder of a religious leader of thousands of illiterate people needed supernatural courage. Transforming myself from a slave to master of my own destiny would need a miracle.

Pir Sain was a symbol of *munafiqat*.

I was soldier.

This was a jihad.

In my eyes... The only thing truly in the name of Allah was Pir Sain's death. (Durrani, 181)

Throughout the novel, Heer's consciousness never allowed her to be a part of Pir's wrong deeds rather she always mentally interrogated and resisted Pir's religious hypocrisy. On the one hand he beats Heer for not wearing bangles and not veiling before six year old child while on the other throws her in front of strangers for the satisfaction of their erotic passion. He plots and witnesses Kaali's

sexual abuses by several men. He also rapes Heer while she is in labour pain, kills his baby boy. He rapes numerous children but kills his son, Chhote Sain, for trying to rape a young girl. Despite doing almost all sorts of sin he publically drapes shawl embroidered with ninety names of Allah.

Water and *Blasphemy* reveal how the names of Hinduism and Islam were respectively misused in the exploitation of women. Both the writers have touched the society's painful nerve. Durrani argued at several places in her novel that the real Islam is quite different from that religion persuaded by Pir. It is the people like Pir Sain and Narayan's father who promote and follow only patriarchal elements of a religion to quench their lustful thirst. However, there is still a long way to go as religious, feudal, tribal and political men insist on degrading position for women in different cultures and societies. Despite their controversial subject matter and excessive description of heart wrenching condition of women in different religions both the novels end at very optimistic note. *Blasphemy* ends with Heer's successful endeavour for the extirpation of shrine worship and Pir Sain. On the contrary Sidhwa has given her novel a revolutionary conclusion where Shakuntala entrusts Chuiya to Narayan to be a part of freedom fighting led by Gandhi. Both the novels depict a genuine account of the status of women in our society and how they as an individual are being crushed under patriarchal patronage.

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