



Unveiling the Dual Struggles: Exploring the Intersectionality of Patriarchy, Caste, and Colonialism in Bapsi Sidhwa's "Water"

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection of patriarchy, caste, and colonial oppression in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water*. Using Feminist Theory and Postcolonial Theory, the research examines how caste-based hierarchies and patriarchal structures marginalize widows in colonial India. The novel presents widows as victims of social ostracization, economic deprivation, and institutionalized oppression, exposing the mechanisms through which both indigenous traditions and colonial rule sustain their subjugation. This study highlights how Sidhwa critiques both these systems while offering a nuanced portrayal of resistance, solidarity, and agency among the widows. Through an intersectional feminist analysis, the paper explores how gender, religion, and class converge to shape the lived experiences of these women and how resistance emerges despite constraints

Keywords: Patriarchy, Caste, Colonialism, Feminist Theory, Postcolonial Theory, Intersectionality, Oppression, Resistance, Widowhood, Social Reform

INTRODUCTION

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* is a compelling novel that critiques the deeply entrenched oppression of widows in colonial India. Set in the 1930s, the narrative sheds light on the lives of women who, upon losing their husbands, are forced into ashrams where they face severe discrimination, deprivation, and social isolation.

Through the vivid portrayal of characters such as Chuhiya, a young widow, Kalyani, a beautiful widow caught in a web of exploitation, and Shakuntala, a widow who represents the older generation, Sidhwa unveils the complex intersection of patriarchal oppression, caste-based segregation, and colonial dominance. The novel highlights the personal and societal suffering experienced by these women and examines how these control systems create a framework for resistance and change. This study will explore how the female characters navigate harsh circumstances, offering a nuanced look at how gender, caste, and colonialism intersect to shape their lives. Furthermore, it will analyze how the novel reflects the potential for personal and collective resistance to oppressive forces, despite the constraints imposed by these societal structures.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically analyze *Water* by Bapsi Sidhwa, focusing on the multifaceted oppression experienced by widows in colonial India. The study explores how Sidhwa's portrayal of widowhood offers a lens through which the broader social issues of gender, caste, and colonialism can be understood. The characters of Chuhiya, Kalyani, and Shakuntala represent the varying experiences of women caught in the oppressive structures of early 20th-century India. By examining their experiences within the context of patriarchal domination, caste-based segregation, and colonial rule, the study will offer insights into the intersectionality of these forces and how they shape the personal identities and social roles of the women.

Moreover, the study explores the concept of resistance as it emerges in the novel. It will analyze the subtle and overt ways the characters resist the harsh conditions imposed on them, whether through acts of defiance, solidarity, or the redefinition of their identities. This study will also reflect on the broader implications of resistance in the face of systemic oppression, drawing connections between historical realities and contemporary struggles for gender equality and social justice.

The study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the novel's critique of colonial India and provide a comprehensive analysis of the power dynamics that shape women's lives. By focusing on *Water*, this study aims to shed light on how literature can act as both a mirror to society and a tool for social critique, offering perspectives on past and present gender-based inequalities.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs **Feminist Theory** and **Postcolonial Theory** as the primary interpretive lenses to analyze the oppression and resilience of the widows in *Water*. When used together, these two frameworks provide a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to understanding the characters' experiences and the social dynamics at play in the novel. Both Feminist and Postcolonial Theory offer critical perspectives on how gender, power, and identity are shaped by historical and cultural forces, particularly in the context of colonial India.

Feminist Theory

Feminist literary criticism examines how patriarchal structures marginalize

women. Feminist theorists such as Bell Hooks (1981), Simone de Beauvoir (1949), and Gayatri Spivak (1988) argue that women's identities are socially constructed within oppressive frameworks that deny them agency. In *Water*, widows are forced into ashrams, reflecting how gender norms control women's bodies and economic independence. De Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" (1949) describes how women are Othered and viewed as dependent on men, a theme seen in *Water* where widows become socially invisible. Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) explains how lower-class women lack a voice in society. Kalyani, for instance, is exploited due to her beauty and caste, while Chuhiya, as a child widow, is entirely powerless. Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble" (1990) argues that gender identity is performative, meaning societal norms dictate how women are expected to behave. The widows in *Water* perform their assigned roles, demonstrating how patriarchy reinforces compliance.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha (1994) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) argue that colonialism reinforced existing social hierarchies rather than dismantling them. *Water* shows how British colonialists claimed to be social reformers while benefiting from the caste system, ensuring their power remained intact.

- Bhabha's "The Location of Culture" (1994) highlights how colonized societies internalize oppression, explaining why widows in *Water* accept their fate rather than revolt.
- Chakrabarty's "Provincializing Europe" (2000) critiques how British rule redefined Indian traditions in ways that suited colonial administration. This mirrors how British officials selectively banned practices like sati but left the caste-based oppression of widows largely untouched.

Through this feminist and postcolonial lens, *Water* reveals that widowhood in colonial India was shaped by multiple layers of systemic oppression, leaving women with few means of escape.

Theoretical Implementation

The intersection of **Feminist Theory** and **Postcolonial Theory** is essential for understanding the complexities of oppression in *Water*. This combined approach allows us to analyze how the widows in the novel experience gendered, caste-based, and colonial forms of subjugation, and how they resist and navigate these multiple systems of control. Below, the three primary components of the study are elaborated in detail:

Widows as Feminist Subjects

In *Water*, the widows are central figures through which gender-based oppression is explored. Feminist Theory critiques the erasure of women from public and political life, and the novel provides a clear depiction of this marginalization.

- **Gendered Oppression and Social Erasure:** The novel portrays widows as individuals whose existence is defined solely by the absence of their husbands. As per feminist perspectives on gendered oppression, women are often relegated to the margins of society once their husbands die, as they lose their identity and are viewed as burdens. The widows in *Water* are forced into

ashrams, where they are isolated from the rest of society. This reflects a broader feminist critique of the ways in which patriarchal structures erase women's social presence once they no longer fit the prescribed role of a wife. Their existence is devoid of sexual and reproductive agency, leading them to be seen as "empty" women, disconnected from society's expectations of femininity.

- **Shakuntala's Quiet Rebellion as Feminist Resistance:** Among the widows, Shakuntala stands out for her quiet form of rebellion against her oppressive circumstances. From a feminist perspective, her subtle resistance—questioning her place within the ashram and her role in society—becomes an act of defiance. Feminist theorists often highlight the importance of women's resistance through everyday actions. Shakuntala's questioning of her circumstances and her eventual decision to challenge the norms of the ashram embody feminist resistance. This act of defiance, though not overtly revolutionary, reflects a refusal to accept her fate passively, reclaiming agency within the confines of her situation. Feminist Theory helps us understand that even small, non-violent forms of resistance are significant in challenging patriarchal control.

Caste as a Tool of Control

The novel not only critiques gender-based oppression but also underscores the role of **caste** in the systematic control of women's lives. Postcolonial Theory's focus on how colonial and indigenous systems of power intersect with local caste dynamics allows for a nuanced critique of caste-based exploitation in *Water*.

- **Caste-Based Oppression:** In colonial India, caste played a central role in defining one's social status and access to power. In *Water*, the caste of a widow determines her worth and the severity of her oppression. From a postcolonial perspective, caste functions as an oppressive system that locks individuals—especially women—into predetermined roles. The widows, especially those of lower castes, experience a compounded form of marginalization, as their gender and caste intersect to intensify their suffering. Postcolonial critiques argue that caste-based systems perpetuate the dominance of upper-caste elites and reinforce a hierarchical structure that further alienates those at the bottom of the social order.
- **Kalyani as an Upper-Caste Sex Worker:** Kalyani's position as an upper-caste sex worker reveals how caste and patriarchy intersect to commodify women's bodies. As an upper-caste woman, Kalyani's body is both a symbol of purity and a commodity to be exploited. She is forced into sex work to support the ashram, a reflection of how caste can determine a woman's social role and her autonomy. Her body becomes a site where the intersections of caste and gender oppression collide. From a postcolonial perspective, this critique demonstrates how colonial legacies, combined with caste-based patriarchy, continue to limit the autonomy and agency of women, even those who belong to higher castes.

Kalyani's suffering is a direct result of the caste system, which restricts women's freedom and commodifies their bodies for survival and social reproduction.

Colonialism's Contradictory Role

The British colonial presence in India played a contradictory role in the lives of women, particularly widows. While the British introduced reforms to address some social injustices, such as the abolition of **sati** and **child marriage**, they did little to dismantle the broader structural systems of oppression, particularly those based on caste and gender.

- **Reforms and Their Limitations:** British colonial reformers, such as those involved in the **social reform movements**, aimed to introduce laws like the **Abolition of Sati Act** and **Child Marriage Restraint Act**, claiming to protect women from exploitation and brutality. From a postcolonial perspective, however, these reforms were often superficial, designed to uphold colonial authority rather than genuinely empower women. The novel critiques the British colonial agenda for presenting these reforms as liberating while maintaining the power dynamics that kept Indian women, particularly widows, oppressed. The British colonial authorities enacted laws to manage Indian society in ways that allowed them to retain control, but these policies rarely challenged the caste-based patriarchy that was deeply ingrained in Indian society.
- **Colonialism and Hindu Patriarchy:** In addition to these reforms, the British also indirectly reinforced Hindu patriarchy by empowering upper-caste elites and traditional religious structures. In *Water*, the colonial presence does not effectively challenge Hindu patriarchy. Instead, it adapts to and strengthens the existing social order by legitimizing certain caste and gender hierarchies. The British, through their rule, contribute to reinforcing gendered and caste-based oppression rather than dismantling it. From a postcolonial standpoint, this critique highlights how colonialism preserved and even amplified certain forms of exploitation within Indian society, leaving the core issues of caste and gender unaddressed.
- **Double Colonization of Women:** In *Water*, the concept of **double colonization**—where women face oppression both from their own social structures (e.g., patriarchy and caste) and from colonial authorities—becomes a central theme. The widows are doubly oppressed: first, by their gender and social status, and second, by the colonial regime that claims to reform but actually perpetuates their subjugation. The British colonial system reinforces existing patriarchal practices and relegates the marginalized populations, including widows, to lives of isolation and subjugation.

This study has examined Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* through the lenses of Feminist Theory and Postcolonial Theory, offering an in-depth exploration of the intersecting systems of oppression that shape the lives of widows in colonial India. Through its

vivid portrayal of widows' lives, the novel critiques both Hindu patriarchy and British colonialism, shedding light on how these forces work in tandem to maintain the subjugation of women, particularly widows. The findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

Critique of Hindu Patriarchy and British Colonialism

One of the key findings of this study is that *Water* critiques the simultaneous and often contradictory roles of Hindu patriarchy and British colonialism in maintaining the oppression of widows.

- **Hindu Patriarchy:** The novel demonstrates how Hindu patriarchal practices, particularly those related to the treatment of widows, create rigid gender roles that confine women to an existence of invisibility and subordination. The ashrams, where widows are forced to live, are symbolic of this patriarchal control, reflecting the broader societal rejection of women once their husbands pass away. The system not only removes widows from the social fabric but also strips them of their individual identities, casting them as burdens rather than as people with agency or potential.
- **British Colonialism:** While colonial authorities in India sought to implement reforms such as the abolition of sati and the prevention of child marriages, their reforms were largely symbolic and often insufficient to address the root causes of widow oppression. The British colonial system, despite its claims of benevolence, allowed patriarchal structures to remain largely intact, thereby perpetuating the oppression of widows. The study reveals how British policies, while promoting some aspects of social reform, ultimately reinforced and legitimized Hindu patriarchy by failing to challenge the deeper societal structures that marginalized women and widows.

In sum, the novel critiques how both systems, the traditional caste-based patriarchy and the colonial government, sustained a culture of oppression for widows, each in their unique way, but often converging to uphold each other's power.

Intersection of Caste, Gender, and Class

Another significant finding is the intersectional nature of oppression in *Water*. The experiences of the widows in the novel cannot be understood by simply looking at gender or caste in isolation, as both these factors are deeply intertwined with class in shaping the widow's social reality. The study highlights the following:

- **Caste:** The caste system remains a pervasive force in the lives of the widows. Widows from lower castes face even harsher discrimination and oppression, as they are seen as lower in the social hierarchy, not only because of their widowhood but also because of their caste. *Water* vividly illustrates how caste influences how a widow is treated and how society perceives her worth. This societal rejection intensifies the widows' suffering and locks them into a cycle of invisibility and dependency. Kalyani's story as a sex worker, for example,

highlights how the caste system commodifies women's bodies, reducing them to objects that are exploited under the guise of social and economic survival.

- **Gender:** The intersection of caste and gender amplifies the marginalization of women. The widows in the novel are denied agency over their lives and bodies. As women, they are not only victims of caste-based discrimination but also of gender-based violence and exploitation. The imposition of widowhood on these women is a means to strip them of their dignity, independence, and social mobility. The portrayal of Shakuntala's quiet rebellion, for instance, showcases a woman whose agency is constrained not only by her gender but also by the societal structure that places caste before individual identity.
- **Class:** Class plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of widows in *Water*. The upper-caste widows, such as Kalyani, experience a different form of oppression compared to their lower-caste counterparts, but both are similarly trapped by the intersecting forces of patriarchy and caste. Kalyani's ability to influence events is limited by her status as a sex worker, which ties her to a marginalized class position despite her upper-caste origins. Thus, *Water* vividly portrays how caste, gender, and class are inextricably linked in creating layers of oppression for widows.

The intersectionality in *Water* emphasizes that the oppression of widows is not a monolithic experience. Rather, their suffering is shaped by a complex web of factors including caste, gender, and class, each of which serves to reinforce the others.

Small but Significant Forms of Female Resistance

Despite the overwhelming oppression the widows face in *Water*, the novel highlights small but significant forms of female resistance that emerge within the confines of an oppressive system.

- **Subtle Acts of Defiance:** Shakuntala's subtle resistance—her questioning of the ashram's rules, her moments of self-awareness, and her eventual decision to fight for autonomy—demonstrates the potential for resistance within even the most constrained environments. From a feminist perspective, these small acts of resistance are vital in challenging dominant power structures. While Shakuntala may not overtly rebel against the ashram's authority, her inner turmoil and gradual awareness of her position symbolize the emergence of agency in a repressive environment.
- **Kalyani's Personal Struggle:** Kalyani, though subjected to the commodification of her body due to her caste and gender, also finds ways to resist her exploitation. Her decision to engage with a deeper level of self-awareness about her situation represents a form of resistance. The novel shows that even in the harshest circumstances, women can find ways to assert some form of control, whether through their thoughts, their choices, or their actions.

- **The Power of Solidarity:** The widows, while isolated and marginalized, form a quiet solidarity within the ashram. They share experiences, express their pain, and sometimes, even protect one another. This solidarity, although fragile, creates a network of emotional and psychological resistance that allows them to endure the oppression they face. Feminist Theory emphasizes that solidarity among oppressed groups can serve as a tool for resistance, even when direct action seems impossible.

These forms of resistance, though small and sometimes subtle, illustrate the resilience of women within oppressive systems and suggest that even within the most rigid frameworks, women can find ways to reclaim agency, challenge norms, and resist control.

Widowhood as a Systemic Issue

Ultimately, *Water* portrays widowhood not as a personal tragedy, but as a systemic issue rooted in structural inequalities that demand intersectional reform. The novel emphasizes that the suffering of widows is not caused by individual circumstances but by the broader social, cultural, and colonial structures that perpetuate their marginalization.

- **Social and Cultural Reform:** The treatment of widows in colonial India is shown to be a product of entrenched cultural norms and practices that require deep social reform. Widowhood, as depicted in *Water*, is not merely an individual loss or a personal tragedy; rather, it is a social institution that is shaped by and perpetuates patriarchy, caste, and colonial rule. The study concludes that the transformation of these structures is necessary to alleviate the suffering of widows and allow for their full integration into society.
- **Intersectional Reform:** To address the systemic issue of widowhood, reform must take an intersectional approach, addressing both gender and caste inequality, as well as the legacy of colonialism. The novel critiques the superficiality of colonial reforms that focused on individual issues like sati and child marriage while failing to tackle the broader and more complex systems of caste and gender oppression that kept widows in a position of perpetual subjugation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Water* provides a powerful critique of the intersectional oppression faced by widows in colonial India. The findings of this study highlight the novel's engagement with issues of Hindu patriarchy, British colonialism, caste, gender, and class, while also recognizing the quiet yet potent forms of resistance exhibited by women like Shakuntala and Kalyani. Ultimately, the novel calls for a systemic and intersectional approach to reform—one that challenges not only the social structures that marginalize widows but also the deeper colonial and patriarchal legacies that continue to perpetuate their oppression. Through these findings, the study

underscores that widowhood in Water is not simply an individual tragedy but a social and systemic issue that requires profound and sustained efforts at reform.

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