In the Grip of Bad Karma: The Baleful Widow in *Water*

Suddenly, her mother-in-law loomed over Chuyia, and, before Chuyia had time to react, she jerked the mangal–sutra off her neck and the beads scattered on the ground; she grasped Chuyia’s hand and, using a brick, violently smashed the red glass bangles that hung from her wrist. Then, methodically, with no more concern for the girl than if she were an inanimate object, she took the other hand and with the brick smashed the bangles on her other wrist. Chuyia, struck speechless, looked at her shattered bangles in dismay. She searched her mother-in-law’s face with astonished, questioning eyes. But her task accomplished, the aggrieved woman trudged off without a word of explanation or a backward glance. Chuyia realized with a stab of shock that she had ceased to matter to this woman. (*Water* 41)

*Water*, an account of a widows’ group living in an *ashram* in Varanasi, by Bapsi Sidhwa epitomizes the bitter reality of widowed life, and widows’ pathetic conditions in colonial period of India. In South Asian countries like India, woman’s oppression in the patriarchal society is quite a common occurrence. The cruelties inflicted on widows, in the name of the old and rotten customs and traditions, by their in-laws as well as the negligence of her kin, make them cultural untouchables in the entire society where these widows are compelled to live an isolated and alien life, deprived of their basic rights as human beings. It is regrettable fact that in Indian society, widows are treated with extreme disparity.

It is ridiculous to know that once woman used to enjoy a high place in the Indian social order, particularly in Hindu religion. She had a pride of place, and had equal rights with man in her family. The ancient holy text of Hindus, *Manusmriti* mentions that;
Nowhere else has ever given this much of reverence to the women as in India. The Vedic age women enjoyed ample freedom, without any discrimination compared to men. Women in those days enjoyed same privileges and rights which their male counterpart used to. In some cases, women were accorded more prestige and honour in comparison to that of men. In *Women in the Rig Vedic age*, N. J. Devi and K. Subrahmanyam write: “Apart from their domestic role in begetting and bringing up progeny and thereby contributing to the continuation of society, they were considered as custodians of morality and values. Even more important is their depiction as individuals with tremendous potential to realize the highest truths.” (1) The name of Ghosha, Lopamudra, Maitreyi, and Gargi are the Vedic women who were greatly respected and treated with high esteem.

The Medieval period was the time when the position, status and respect of the Hindu women in Indian society gradually began to decline. The deterioration of woman’s social status first began after the Islamic invasion in India, and gradually it became highly pathetic. The women now in this era became a commodity. This resulted in several social evils like child marriage, Purdah system etc. which deteriorated their status more rapidly. Several social ills, including the tradition of Sati belittled women’s identity in the society. Women began to be forced to burn or be burned in the pyres of their dead husbands.

The novel, *Water*, draws readers’ attention towards the age old social evils, still prevalent in several parts of India where woman has been exploited and oppressed in the name of creed and culture. *Water*, the fifth novel of Sidhwa published in 2006, is set in the
from the British regime. The novel, based on a film by Deepa Mehta, is a realistic account and examination of the widows in India and their pathetic conditions. The main concern of this novel is child marriage, widowhood, exploitation of women by the elite ‘Brahmins’. The ways the widows are victimized and maltreated have been depicted realistically. The novel also examines the ways these widows are kept shackled in the name of old and rotten customs by the patriarchy, and exposes the domination and power of patriarchal values imposed upon women manipulating the various ancient sacred scriptures. Being regarded inauspicious, widows were and still are, though in small measure, discarded to leave in an *ashram* especially meant for them. These women are compelled to lead entirely an isolated and deplorably restricted and pathetic life. The novelist, like a chronicler, depicts the pathetic conditions of the widows at that time in India. The protagonist of the novel is Chuyia, a girl of eight-year. The novel exposes the widespread subjugation of widowed women that has been prevailed and still prevails in Hinduism.

The novelist probes various issues in the novel that have direct concern with the multi-exploitations of widows, done by the so called elite class of the society, who associate the widowhood of a woman with her past *karma*. Brahmins and other Hindu scriptures like *Rig Veda, Bhagavad Gita* term it as the ‘deed’ or ‘action’ done in the past by someone, which are classified as good and bad *karmas*. This law of ‘*karma*’ and ‘rebirth’ has been manipulated by Brahmins to their benefits. A civilization which bestowed equal status to women with men, and where women had identical place in the society with men, gradually began to confine her in the four walls of the house and foist several bondages. The culmination of the subjugation of widows came in the medieval age when they were began to be victimized and even exploited physically, and compelled to immolate themselves in the pyre of their dead husbands. The present story is a sort of reliving of the injustice widows, particularly Brahmin
widows, underwent in the 1930s. The novel is the story of Chuyia and other widows like her, and brings forth the exploitation of widowed women in the patriarchal society of India.

The prologue of the novel takes the reader to the idyllic world of Chuyia who is a six year old innocent girl, dwells in the lap of a small village. She spends her childhood time searching wild leeches and gooseberries in the bushes, moving nonchalantly in the lap of Nature, and playing her toys. Like a Nature girl, Chuyia “had little fear of the forest, and was as familiar with it as a child brought up near the ocean is familiar with its shore.” (Water 8) The novelist with her penetrating insight enters into the tranquillity and glory of the childhood life of the country girl. She has depicted the beautiful surroundings of Nature amidst which the little girl Chuyia dwells, insouciant and carefree from the impending lot of her life.

In India, the social life is dominated by the elite class whereas familial life is governed by the patriarchy, the life of the other members of the society or family is monopolized in the name of traditions, customs and creeds. Womankind is ever inferior in family and social strata. No rights are bestowed upon women in the decision process. Sidhwa exposes the autocratic behaviour of Somanath when he informs Bhagya about the offer given by Hira Lal’s mother regarding Chuyia’s marriage with her son Hira Lal, a forty four years old widower: “I have agreed,” he said. “Their horoscopes match. We have looked at some auspicious date. They want the marriage to take place before Diwali— in September or October”. (Water 13) The novelist here reveals the domineering approach of patriarchy in the mid-twentieth century that conferred no right to women even in the highly prominent family affairs like marriage. In most of the societies of India, women are even today mere puppets of men, and are given scant regard to her views in family matters. In the eyes of men, women are reckoned worthless, and whose attitude towards women had always been belligerent. Bhagya’s husband settled Chuyia’s marriage with an aged widower. She lodged her protest,
though in vain, saying: “Shouldn’t you have consulted me?” and finding no response she gave vent to her anger saying: “It is settled then! Why bother to tell me.” (Water 13) Sidhwa reveals the fact that in Hindu family, woman’s opinions are very rarely considered, instead it is taken as a rebellious streak and challenge to patriarchal authority: “The hard glint in her husband’s eyes pierced Bhagya like an arrow hurled by the God Arjuna; he had never looked at her this way before. Frozen with the weight of a hoary tradition that brooked no deviation, his look chilled her blood.” (Water 15) Sidhwa brings forth the real status of woman in Hinduism where patriarchy plays the role of woman’s vigorous suppressor. Bhagya’s realization of the patriarchal superiority makes her apologize to her husband: “I am sorry,” she said humbly, duly chastened . . . It will be as you say—you are her father.” (Water 15) These words of Bhagya prove the patriarchal sovereignty and tyranny in the grave matter like marriage.

Through the marriage of Chuyia, the novelist draws her reader’s attention towards the grave issue of child marriage in pre-independence India. From the medieval ages, the evil of child marriage came to its existence and soon, engulfed almost the whole Indian Hindu society. Though, in the recent times, the Government has taken strong steps to check this absurd social tradition, it is still prevalent in several parts of the country. In the widespread expansion of child marriage, patriarchy and matriarchy are equally responsible as they consider the girl child a sort of burden over the family: “She is safe and happy only in husband’s care.” (Water 14) The sense of insecurity, poverty and teachings of Hindu sacred scriptures are the motivational forces behind the early marriage of a girl child: “. . . a woman is recognized 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.” (Water 14)
Sidhwa sheds light on the pre-independence Brahmanical society, where women had no self identity, her identity and honour was conferred on her by her marriage: “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: have sons! That is all!” (Water 15) Sidhwa reproaches the age old practice of obscurantism that was prevailed against women who were considered merely ‘child bearing machine’ in Hindu society. This sort of mentality and approach is highly responsible in confining feminine within the four walls of her home. This blatant sexism was rampant in the medieval society, and is still entrenched deeply in the modern Indian society as well. It starts from the time when the girl child is born. It is observed that the boys and girls are treated differently. The girl child generally receives less care than the boy child, and it is going on consistently. This sort of gender based discrimination has been prevailed in all the social strata. Even women, knowingly or unknowingly, discriminate their own girl child in many ways:

Bhagya knew she must have looked like this at Chuyia’s age. Then why did she not lavish on her the affection and attention she lavished on her sons? Feel the same surge of love and pride for her daughter? Was it because her heart knew that a daughter was only a guest and never belonged to the house into which she was born? As she looked down at her daughter’s baby face, Bhagya’s eyes became moist and she was swept by a wave of tenderness and pity she had not allowed herself to feel before. She kissed her daughter’s forehead and brushed her eyelids with her lips. (Water 16-17)

Discrimination against a girl child in India has been pervasive from the ancient period. The birth of a girl child is mostly not cherished here that is why the rate of the female foeticide and infanticide is much higher than any other country of the region. The girl child has
to suffer severe deprivation as well. In Hinduism, a girl child is considered as a liability, while a boy child as an upholder and actual heir of the family. Even the matriarchal approach is not favourable towards a girl child. Sidhwa dexterously reveals the bias prevailed towards a girl child: “Bhagya never worried about her robust daughter and, scolding her for her playful and wilful ways, plied her sturdy little body with work—fetch the water, carry the fire-wood, sweep the yard, feed the cow.” (Water 16) Woman under the strictures of patriarchy becomes herself a tool subjugator of her own gender. The patriarchal society has designed her role so shrewdly that she is entrapped wilfully in it, and slavishly following the patriarchal norms, becomes herself a covert sexist. Bhagya sees her daughter as a replica of her own self. The realization of the bias treatment meted out to Chuyia by her, causes a sharp pang of remorse and guilt:

Bhagya sat up, suddenly filled with a guilty sense of foreboding; a mother’s unbridled love would surely attract nazar to her child. Bhagya snapped her fingers thrice in quick succession to ward off the evil eye. She drew her sari over her bowed head and, folding her hands, prayed to Shashthi, the goddess of children, to watch over her sleeping daughter. (Water 16)

In Hinduism, woman is subordinate to man. She is deliberately kept confined in the name of traditions and rites and rituals. She is assigned to serve her husband, an attendant of her husband’s call, and treated as a child producing machine. Marriage is the sole object of the life of a woman. In The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir says: “. . . often she [the adult woman as a wife] commits herself to furnish a certain amount of domestic work; she maintains the house and raises the children.” (228) The idea of marriage is thrust on a girl child from the early age and taught as the basic and ultimate goal of her life. In The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir aptly writes: “Marriage is the destiny that society proposes traditionally
to women. Even today, most women are married, have been married, prepare themselves to be married, or suffer from not being married.” (221) A girl child is expected to learn behavioural traits as well, that are not essential for a boy child to learn, so as to make her an ideal wife and daughter-in-law. Bhagya says to Chuyia: “If you talk back to your mother-in-law like this, she will shame me for not bringing you up properly. . .” (Water 20)

Brahmins are the highest in the varna system in Hinduism. Brahmins are often priests who are responsible for performing sacred rites. They are believed to have invented the wick-ed caste system putting themselves at the top of it. They are charged of exploiting the religious scriptures especially in the subjugation of women. They were able to dictate the terms in religious and social life as the elite group of the society. They are castigated for enforcing those customs which contribute highly in women’s segregation. The temples in ancient India were at the helm of Brahmins because of their knowledge of sacred scriptures and holy rites. Sidhwa writes: “Only Brahmins were allowed inside the temple.” (Water 26) The annihilation of woman’s status occurred completely because of the hideous customs propagated by Brahmins who were crafty enough in interpreting ancient religious text for their benefit, and they were the chief exploiters as well who never missed an opportunity in sating their lust as well from these widows either ogling or abusing sexually. Sadananda’s eying widows up is an evidence of it:

When he had first assumed his duties as a young priest, he had been over-whelmed by the proximity of their bodies, ripe beneath coarse, loosely-spun saris that stretched to accommodate each curve and dent of their desirable flesh and left little to the imagination. He lusted for the young, the middle-aged and, except for the very old, even the elderly . . . he had succumbed and occasionally taken advantage of the access his position as their priest and
mentor gave him. If the gods lusted and got what they wanted, how was he, a puny mortal, to resist the allure of these women? (Water 95)

Like her other novel The Crow Eaters, in which Sidhwa has given detailed description of the Parsi marriage, in Water, she has given minute depiction of the Hindu marriage ceremony:

. . . Chuyia’s aunt rubbed the turmeric paste all over her body askance . . .

Since their village was situated on the Bengal-Bihar border, the rituals represented a mixture of Hindu customs from both provinces.

Chuyia was shown the present the groom had sent her—jewellery, which included a gold mangal sutra necklace, and several saris for her to change into on the wedding day. Elaborate makeup was applied to her face, with small white dots over the eyebrows, and her hair was decorated with flowers and stuck with the ornaments she asked for: sun, moon, stars made of tinsel. A gold chain was placed along the part in her hair and another around her neck.

As the bride, borne in a palanquin and the groom in elaborate head-gear (both preceded by ragged village bands) made their separate way to the wedding hall, the women from the villages in Bengal ululated to draw attention to the wedding ceremony itself; a conch was blown to complement the “oolu-oolu,” in keeping with the tradition.

Chuyia was made to sit in front of Agni, the sacred fire . . . A corner of Chuyia sari was tied to a long stole wrapped around Hira Lal’s neck and shoulders, and they were made to stand. With Agni, the Holy Fire as witness, the groom and his bride walked seven times around a pattern on the floor . . . The groom
applied the red *sindoor* to the parting in the bride’s hair and to her forehead. As a Hindu woman, the bride would wear this symbol from the time of the *Sindoor Daan* until her death. Of all the ceremonial gifts, the *kanya daan*, or bride-gift, is considered to be the holiest. Just as the giver can no longer lay claim to an object that has once been donated, the parents of a traditional Hindu bride have no rights over their daughter once she has been gifted to the bridegroom. The groom then offered his bride a new sari with which to cover her head, and with this act the couple was considered officially married. (*Water* 25-28)

Of numerous traditional Hindu nuptial customs, *kanyadaan* or bride-gift is one that is highly misogynistic and downright, treating woman as commodity.

Dowry system is one of the noteworthy evils prevailed in Hinduism. Sidhwa raises the issue of dowry system as a social evil prevailed those days in Hinduism, rooted deeper in Brahmin society. The highly significant religious sacrament like marriage is stained by the menace of dowry system. It has been a curse for the poor to find a suitable match for their daughters within their means. It causes them to compromise with unsuitable match for their daughters. In *Water*, Somanath persuades his wife Bhagya for Chuyia’s marriage with widowed, aged Hira Lal: “They don’t want a dowry; they will pay for the wedding . . .” (*Water* 13) Sidhwa reveals how grave issue has been the dowry for the girl child’s parents. She highlights the other side of the dowry system as well where the giving of dowry is considered as a matter of pride to the rich. In *Water*, Madhumati tells Gulabi about her father’s benevolence and generosity, two of the widows living in the widow *ashram*: “When the family forced him to get me married, he gave me a dowry like I was a King’s daughter!” (*Water* 84)
Bapsi Sidhwa exposes the varied evils and superstitions that rule the life of Hinduism. She draws her reader’s attention towards the traditional practice of menstrual taboos that make woman to live in seclusion. Women in their menstrual period are considered impure and thus, they are not permitted to enter the temple’s premise. In the Vedic age, the outlook of society was more liberal in this regard as menstruation was considered as a natural process. The Vedic society was a true egalitarian society where woman, during her menstrual period, was free to offer prayers also in the temples. But, with the advent of Islam in India, women were begun to be restrained and confined through their menstrual period, labelling them as impure, as such they were not allowed to enter in temples as well: “Since the presence of menstruating women would defile the wedding and pollute the temple, food would be left at their doors.” (Water 26) It reveals the misogynistic attitude of men and marginalization and exploitation faced by the women in the 1930s by the patriarchy led by the Brahmins who held immense power in the religious and social arena. But, it is ridiculous that even in the high class civilized society, restrictions are imposed on such a woman and she is forced to live in isolation.

In Hindu social system, numerous practices and beliefs are observed which are ages old; but there is no authenticity about the founder and constitutor of these rigid customs. These customs and traditions have always been domineering force in Hindu culture. Culture can be defined as human values, customs and beliefs that bind people of a specific caste, creed and ethnic group together. It is a way of life. It is a sort of social code of conduct and controlling force as well. It is also a non-instinctive, learned human behavioural traits that dictate and guide human life. In Primitive Culture, Edward B. Taylor writes: “Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (I)
Culture has been a vital tool in Hinduism in imposing restrictions upon its people, particularly women, whose life is made confined while they are married. Chuyia faces an abrupt change in her life after her marriage. A deep concern is aroused in her mother to make her acquainted with their cultural traditions and conventions. She gives utmost care to make her learn the social and familial customs and traditions. Chuyia’s insouciant life is interrupted. Her mother scolds her for being immersed in her childhood world: “Cover your head, you’re a married woman now,” or, “You mustn’t go jumping in the pond and wandering off into the forest like this: if your mother-in-law finds out she won’t like it.” (Water 30) She is placed under several restraints. This undue concern of her mother reflects how culture affects one’s life in Hinduism.

Sidhwa shows how Indian society is under the sturdy clutches of numerous superstitions and beliefs. In Water, She reveals the Hindu belief of moksha. Moksha is the salvation from the cycle of birth and death which every Hindu wishes to attain for himself or his/her dear one. It is the main concern and objective of the followers of this religion. Various Hindu religious scriptures also teach the same sort of preaching to their followers. When Hira Lal was in moribund state because of typhoid, his mother wishes him to breathe his last at the banks of the holy river Ganges “so he can liberate his soul and attain moksha.” (Water 31). His wife Chuyia is summoned to join her husband as “It is the moral thing to do.” (Water 31) Hira Lal’s deteriorating health causes great concern in Bhagya for Chuyia’s future:

She knew that in Brahmin 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 a 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. (Water 32)
Bhagya’s apprehension for her daughter’s impending doom epitomizes the general concern for the widows who are ostracised from the main stream of society. The life of widows in Hinduism is an ordeal in itself. Dipti Mayee Sahoo in *An Analysis of Widowhood in India: A Global Perspective* writes: “Widows are thought to be cursed in some cultures . . . Such misconceptions can lead to widows being ostracized, abused and worse.” (46) There is social stigma against the widows in Hinduism. They are confined in the shackles of innumerable restrictions, constraints and prohibitions, and are deprived of fundamental rights as human beings as well. They have to undergo all sorts of discriminations and bias. At the same time, they are regarded a threat to society lest her dormant libidos might not be aroused. Sidhwa writes: “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. . .” (Water 32)

Sidhwa depicts about the various forces which are overtly at work in the society in subjugating and oppressing woman. These forces are responsible for the suffering of woman-kind, as they manipulate in subduing and victimizing her. In *The Voice of the Marginalised*, Beena Agarwal writes: “Chuyia too is victim of ‘double colonisation’: firstly she appears as a victim of patriarchy and secondly she suffers the ordeals of conservative Brahmin cult.” (66) Chuyia loses her husband and thus loses her identity as a married woman, yet she is foisted upon a new identity of ‘widow’. The death of her husband can be considered as her social death. In *Status of Indian Widows*, Vignesh N. Bhat writes: “Widowhood is both a crisis and a problem. The Indian woman, soon after widowhood, is excluded from caste rituals and ceremonies. She is subjected to total segregation . . .” (28) Sidhwa highlights the various practices associated with the accomplishment of widowhood. Chuyia had to undergo several rituals before she could attain her complete widowhood. One of the hired women pulled her blouse saying: “You cannot wear colours or stitched clothes . . . and . . . “From now on you
will have to wear what all widows wear . . .” (Water 42) Then, a barber cut off her hair completing her passage into widowhood: “. . . he examined the child’s hair . . . He had never tonsured such a young widow before.” (Water 43) All the activities associated with Chuyia are meant to destroy her identity as a woman and the “. . . brutal transmutation of Chuyia’s body being shorn as a trademark of her civil death and the strict severance from old ties marks the beginning of the miserable life that awaits her in the destitute Widows’ House.” (Mercanti 168)

The immense agony of a father is typified by Sidhwa when she writes: “. . . Resting his head on the palm of his hand, he watched the procedure covertly, through gaps in his fingers; there was an unaccustomed tremor in them, and his face held the cumulative sorrow of all fathers who had watched their young daughters go through this agonizing ritual . . .” (Water 43-44) Marriage of a girl child with an elderly person was very common, and was in vogue in Hindu religion that was the root cause of the problem of child widows. In Unspoken History of India of Six Thousand Years, Anand Mohun Sinha has aptly written:

. . . brahmin pundits invariably proclaimed the widowed girl as cursed, husband-eater, and the harbinger of bad luck. Therefore, as per the dictates of the higher caste, she had no right to endanger another man, and therefore, must remain a widow for life. No person in the community could dare to marry her again. Such were the taboos of fear and ignorance propagated by the so called, knowledgeable brahmans . . . the child widow had to undergo double misery. First, by becoming a life time widow and second, by being ill treated by the parents in-law whose son she was supposed to have devoured. (101)

Sidhwa delineates in detail about the Hindu rites of cremation. She visualizes the process and activities associated to the cremating a dead body in Hindu religion:
Hira Lal’s body had been prepared for the last rites in one of the warren of rooms behind the abode facade of the ghat. Pallbearers were chanting “Ram Naam Satya Hai,” “Lord Ram thy name is truth,” in the still of the night . . . Funeral attendants, the doms, busily fetched firewood from the storage rooms behind the walls and piled it for the cremations, while near the pyres grieved relatives anointed their dead with holy water from the river.

Chuyia watched as two men entered the ghat, carrying Hira Lal’s body on a bier. His body was wrapped in a white cloth, but his face was exposed . . .

The funeral pyre was built on a stone platform with steps leading up to it. The bier was first placed diagonally with Hira Lal’s head on the platform and his feet touching the ground below. Then his body was hoisted atop the wooden funeral pyre. (Water 40-41)

Chuyia is abandoned in a widowed ashram by her mother-in-law, to spend the rest of her life there. There is no place for her willingness or unwillingness. Age old Brahmncial rules are framed as such that there is no way to escape them. In The Fictional World of Bapsi Sidhwa: Gender, Community and History, Amit Kumar Dubey writes: “She is compelled to abandon the warmth of her family home and is banished into the cold and calculative precincts of a widow’s ashram. It is an environment of forced confinement where married women, on the death of their spouses, are left to rot as faceless members of society . . .” (107) Chuyia’s bewildered father has no other option except to honour the rigid social order which gives full control to in-laws over the married girl. The domination of in-laws, once a girl is married, can be noticed. Sidhwa writes: “Somanath stood helpless to his fate and the fate of his daughter . . .” (Water 50) In Problems of Widows in India, K.A. Parvathy writes: “This is because the gender concerns that reinforce the stereotyped patriarchal values bring about a
social death for a widow . . . The society attributes personhood to woman only if she is married and living with her husband. Once she ceases to be a wife she ceases to be a person . . .”

(9) In the colonial period, the married Hindu woman’s life was governed according to the wishes of her in-laws, and the parents were merely the helpless observer of the doom of their daughter:

He gazed at her as if he wanted to fix her form forever in his memory. Every line in his weary face reflected his grief at her untimely widowhood and the parting that loomed ahead of them like a curse. Finally, giving way to the pain that seemed to have squeezed his heart into something wrung-out and dry, he lay his head on the stone and began to weep, releasing his anguish in half-stifled sobs that racked his body. (Water 39)

The role of ancient Indian religious and Holy Scriptures has been immense in widows’ social segregation that assigns low status to women in comparison to men. The existence of a woman relies on her husband. It is through her husband that a woman is identified in society. Widowhood is itself a sort of great calamity for a woman because of the possible economic hardship. In the decade of 1930s, the isolation of widows in ashrams was a common occurrence. In pre-independent India, the roots of social forces and customs in Hinduism were highly deep and binding to its people. Acting against the accepted social norms meant to suffer social boycott. In such circumstances, one has no other option but to be a helpless imitator, observer or witness:

Chuyia’s face crumpled with disbelief. Cutting through the questions that swirled in her mind, she asked, “Where is amma?”
His face heavy with sadness, Somnath turned away, unable to answer his daughter. His lip was drawn in a taut, grieved line, and his chin crumpled beneath it. The flesh beneath his neck hung in a deep fold. (Water 49)

During the colonial and pre-colonial era, widowhood was considered an outcome of widowed woman’s own past sins. She was thought to be an inauspicious, impure and untouchable being whose presence would annihilate the whole bright prospects of someone’s life–an evil eye and a baleful widow, whose very existence is thought to be harmful for others. Her head was shaved, had to wear white sari, and relinquish luxuries of life. She had hitherto forbidden wearing mangalsutra, vermilion and bangles, or putting on cosmetics on her face. Ancient Hindu scriptures are discriminating against women in favour of men that sanctify unequal and bias treatment against women. In The Hindu Widow in Indian Literature, Rajul Sogani writes:

A widow should give up adorning her hair, chewing betel-nut, wearing perfumes, flowers, ornaments and dyed clothes, taking food from a vessel of bronze, taking two meals a day, applying collyrium to her eyes, she should wear a white garment, should curb her sense and anger, she should not resort to deceit and tricks, should be free from laziness and sleep, should be pure and of good conduct, should always worship God, should sleep on the floor at night on a mat . . . (Sogani 7)

Widows are considered inauspicious in the Brahmanical society. The widows are eliminated from the all sort of ceremonies and auspicious occasions, and even deprived of attending the marriages of their own children, considering their presence as a bad omen. They are treated as untouchables whose slightest touch or even touch of their shadow can make one impure. In the novel, when Kalyani collides with a woman returning from the river, infuriated
woman burst out: “You have no shame.” . . . “You have no morals! You are a widow, and yet you run around like you are an unmarried girl?” . . . “You’ve polluted me. I have to bath again!” (Water 73) When Chuyia runs past a stall in search of her pet dog, the cashier hollers at her: “Go back to the ashram, child.” . . . “The shouldn’t allow widows to run around like this. They bring bad luck to our business.” (Water 74) The harsh and hostile treatment of in-laws worsened widow’s life who shunned her for no crime of her own. The agony and intense suffering of the widowed women make their life extremely piteous and pathetic. The only solace for such women lies in observing their religious duties as widows. They wish for nothing since no wish is left there in their life. These widows lead their remaining life waiting for their last hour in the hypocritical atmosphere of ashrams that are meant to suppress their individuality as women. Sidhwa has portrayed the helplessness and melancholy of these unfortunate women in Water. Frail and helpless widows, who are themselves victims of circumstances, are treated as social threat. It is ridiculous that these unfortunate ones are considered as harbingers of misfortune whose touch would spoil the prospect of fortunate ones. When fascinated Shakuntala begins to watch a beautiful young bride at the centre of a wedding ceremony, she is humiliated by the priest:

Shakuntala slowly descended the steps. The priest had his back to her, but some members of the wedding party began to stir uneasily. As she stooped to fill the pot with water, the ceremony came to an abrupt halt. The priest spoke sharply to Shakuntala. ‘Watch it! Don’t let your shadow touch the bride.’ Shakuntala stood rooted to the step, in shock at being addressed this way by a priest. Lowering her eyes in apology, she turned her back on the group and ascended the steps with as much dignity as she could muster. (Water 114)
The whole web of Hinduism is based on the theory of *Karma*. The theory of evil and *Karma* colours the entire Hindu philosophy of life. *Karma* is thought to be influential to the entire life and actions of the people. According to this doctrine, the future fate of a person is determined by the actions committed in the present life, and the sufferings of the present life are the consequences of the bad *karmas*, committed in the past life. *Karma* influences the future and the next life of the individual. In Hinduism, it is believed that good *karma* of a man leads to future happiness and bad karma to future sufferings. Any misfortune in the life is directly linked with one’s past bad *karma*. In *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture and Practice*, Robert Rinehart writes: “The word *karma* literally refers to an act, and by extension it implies the effects or “fruits” of that action. The particular nature of an action, whether good or bad, determines whether the “fruits” of the action will ripen, or achieve fruition, in this or another lifetime. What happens to the atman at death is determined by whatever actions have yet not ripen, or had an effect. From one lifetime to the next, the atman is confined within particular bodies—animal, human, even divine—each rebirth determined by *karma.*” (20) The Hindu culture encompasses the theory of *Karma* as its significant part, and its influence is widely acknowledged in every walk of its people’s life. But, the theory of *karma* has vitally affected the life of widowed woman. She is reckoned to be in the grip of bad *karma*. Widowed woman is alleged to be responsible for the death of her husband, thus, she has to observe various restrictions and constraints in rest of her life, as penitence and repentance for the sins committed by her earlier in her life. Sidhwa writes: “Abandoning the howling child to her fate, Hira Lal’s mother, blaming the girl for a karmic debt of past sins that had deprived her of her son . . .” (Water 50) In Hindu religion, for the death of her husband, the wife is considered utterly responsible for it, it is a failure on her part in fulfilling her duty as an obedient wife, hence, she has to repent for her *karma*, an obligatory act for all members of
the society to approve it: “There was nothing they could say or do in the face of her karma. (Water 31)

Sidhwa’s Water is a microscopic observation of the varied facets of widowed life—its seclusion, severity, subjugation, suppression, prostitution, patriarchal dominion, vulnerability, rebellion and emancipation. Sidhwa holds mirror to the life of the widows in the tram-melled world of religious and social obscurantism. At the same time, it is a realistic picture of the widows who are confined within the social boundaries.

Widows in ashrams are an ostracized community. Their countenance speaks their isolation and sorrows. Sidhwa depicts the crowd of widows who assemble to see Chuyia, the newly arrived widow: “Wraith-like figures in white saris, their every movement seemed to be an apology for their continued existence. They were unadorned expect for the two-pronged ash-smears on their foreheads . . .” (Water 51) Bewildered and anxious Chuyia is soothed in “dulcet sympathetic tone” by Madhumati: “In our shared grief, we’re all sisters here, and this ashram is our only refuge.” (Water 52) The widows in the ashram were of all ages, but they were “. . . similar in their innocence and in their vulnerability, they completed a circle. The very young and the very old belonged together.” (Water 56)

Chuyia’s advent in the widows’ ashram creates tumult, and with her germinates the seeds of transformation and rebellion there. In Post Colonial Women Writers, New Perspective, Sunita Sinha writes:

Inside the widow Ashram, Chuyia encounters the strong and the weak, the corrupt and the honest, the victims and the victors. There, this impish girl disrupts daily life in the Ashram and becomes a catalyst for change in the lives of the widows, including her friend, the beautiful widow prostitute Kalyani, and her protector Shakuntala, who discovers her hidden power. Slowly, Chuyia
overcomes her sense of dislocation, makes friends with other women in the ashram and stirs a few hackles with her directness in situations. . . . (253)

Chuyia blows the trumpet of revolution in the ashram. She “refuses to be enslaved by the oppressive limitations of the monolithic patriarchal system.” (Mercanti 170) Chuyia poses the real challenge to the authority of Madhumati who, for the first time, at the receiving end: “Chuyia darted forward on all fours and dug her sharp teeth into Madhumati’s thick ankle.” (Water 53) Discontented with Madhumati’s tyrannical acts, Chuyia’s rebellious streak prompts her to inflict a hurt on her to teach her lesson of her life. She “. . . moved quickly across the room and opened Mitthu’s cage. The bird flapped a wing and began to squawk. As if in the grip of a nightmare she couldn’t get out of, Chuyia plunged her hands in and grabbed the bird. Holding its wings still, she wrenched Mitthu out of the cage, and with a swift twist, wrung his neck.” (Water 178) Chuyia infuses a new hope into the monotonous and dull life of the widows. In fact, as Sunita Sinha opines in Post-Colonial Women Writers, she “. . . becomes a catalyst for change in the lives of the widows.” (253) It is Chuyia who becomes instrumental in bringing Narayan and Kalyani close. The episode of Narayan-Kalyani meeting has been vividly describes by Sidhwa: “He stood transfixed, completely enchanted, and stared at her as if she were the first woman created by God. . . . Their eyes met. His intense, handsome face and the adulation transparent in his eyes left her feeling breathless and weak . . . and her body was responding of its own accord.” (Water 77) In Bapsi Sidhwa’s Water, Beena Agarwal writes: “It is a projection of her unconscious desire to emancipate herself and crush those who are responsible for her plight.” (69)

Madhumati, the headwoman of the ashram, is depicted as a tyrant figure. She was like a satanic figure of about fifty, who reigned over the widows of the ashram. She was fat and domineering, who, though herself a widow enjoys all the luxuries of life which were devoid
to other widows: “Stretched out like a beached whale, Madhumati lay flat on an iron bedstead . . . A small hookah lay by her side . . .” (Water 58) Sidhwa portrays Madhumati as a symbol of the tyrannical order of the colonial rule of the time in India. In The Fictional World of Bapsi Sidhwa, Amit Kumar Dubey writes: “Through her we learn the rules of the game of an ashram of that period—the hierarchy, the pecking order, the mystifying compromises, the helplessness that Hindu widows had to endure the rigid power structure.” (109) Madhumati thrust other widows of the ashram on prostitution. She was an exploiter who was once herself exploited after the death of her husband by her two brothers-in-law. She was raped and left to die in the wilderness. The irony of the fact is that Madhumati, a one-time exploited widow, established her supremacy over other widows exploiting them. Her character is presented as a slick woman who can manipulate the situation by her eloquence, and can attempt to scandalize one by violent means. Madhumati asks the widows sitting around her, how a woman who is half-dead because of the death of her husband can feel any pain. Chuyia’s reply “Because she’s half alive?” infuriated Madhumati: “Flaring into a sudden rage, Madhumati heaved herself up from her charpoy and threw the little girl to the ground.” (Water 53) Sidhwa highlights the fact how the custodian turns into an oppressor, especially when once unjustly treated treats unjustly to other of its kind.

Sidhwa has raised the issues of forced prostitution of widows in the Pre-Independence era. She renders several instances from Madhumati to Chuyia to illustrate her point of view. In Water, Madhumati, after being widowed, was sexually assaulted. She was helped by an elderly widow to have an abortion of the undesired foetus, and then she was forced to prostitution. Madhumati forced Kalyani into prostitution when she headed the ashram. Kalyani was sent across the river to one Seth Dwarkanath “For survival.” (Water 170) Shakuntala, one of the widows, is able to escape forced prostitution: “But for her brothers’ charity, she would have been prostituted like Kalyani was.” (Water 174) Chuyia is sent with Gulabi by
Madhumati to meet the expenses of the *ashram* in lieu of Kalyani. In an episode in the novel, Rabindra tells: “The gentry here have an ‘unnatural concern’ for widows.” (Water 89) Madhumati, who acts as a tool in Kalyani’s prostitution, had been a victim of forced and circumstantial prostitution: “The elderly widow who headed the *ashram* had helped Madhumati abort the fetus resulting from rape. She had allowed the girl’s hair to grow and had nourished her back to health. At the end of two months, she asked an older eunuch to take the girl to a “client.” (Water 86) These instances unveil the reality how the widowed *ashrams* had become haunts of prostitution for raising funds for the *ashrams* to run and to gratify the lust of elite in the society. At a time, when elites do not let a widow’s shadow fall on them as an omen of misfortune, the same people never missed an opportunity to seduce her. Dwarkanath tells: “Our Holy Texts say Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want, and the women they sleep with are blessed.” (Water 201) It is noticed that those widows, who are young, are forced into the prostitution or else they willingly adopt prostitution making it an additional source of their livelihood. The sexual victimization of widows in *Water* exposes the bitter reality of the life of the unfortunate widows and also the immorality and licentiousness of the patriarchy. Irony of the situation is that the ‘unholy’ widows are considered ‘holy’ for sexual exploitation by the elite class of the Hindu society. This class has been so wily and crafty that it has skillfully manipulated the teachings of the sacred Hindu books to its favour, and it has been a leading tool in woman’s subjugation.

The love affair of Narayan and Kalyani is entirely idealistic. It is a spiritual sort of love like that of any deities. For Kalyani, it is like the re-arrival of spring in appalling wilderness of her life. Narayan’s love for Kalyani is purely inspired by the Gandhian ideals of social reform. His love springs from the fathom of his heart, but underlies the staunch desire of playing the role in her emancipation by marrying her. Narayan is “mesmerised” by the austerity of her beauty: “Kalyani looked into his eyes, and then lowered her regard. Narayan edged
a little closer and griped her hands more tightly. Kalyani felt her blood turn to water and her legs tremble: then everything in the world ceased to exist except his hand in hers.” (Water 155) The novelist has employed this episode as an interlude to provide warmth and enthusiasm to the readers. But, Narayan and Kalyani’s love, though intense, proves short lived. Chuyia’s inadvertently discloses the secret of their love to Madhumati. Kalyani later learns that Narayan is the son of Seth Dwarkanath, her client. Instead of going back to ashram and confine herself within the bound of rotten customs and prevailing social orthodoxies, she resolves to keep herself free by drowning herself into the river: “Kalyani knew she had no choice: there was only one avenue open to her. Cast out in the streets she would die, but to live without Narayan and return to a life of force prostitution would be a worse kind of death. Her very existence would cast a shadow on Narayan’s life and blight it.” (Water 205) Kalyani finds herself in the labyrinth of life, helpless to fight against the exploitative forces. She realizes the truth of deeply entrenched lines of restraints for the widows, and decides to break the shackles of oppression:

She took one step into the shallow water at the river’s edge and then sat down on the last stair. The cool water seeped through her Sari, but her body was so cold that it felt warm against her skin. She removed a brown cloth band from her wrist, and set it gently on top of the folded sari. Kalyani rose and walked slowly into the river until the water came up to her knees. She bent to splash her face with the sacred water that flowed from Shiva’s head, and smoothed it over her face and hair. She clasped her hands in prayer for a moment. Then she calmly walked into the river until her short hair floated in an inky stain on the water.

Ma Ganga had claimed her daughter. (Water 205)
Kalyani sacrifice her life, she dies breaking all the societal shackles but, as Beena Agarwal in *Bapsi Sidhwa’s Water: The Voice of the Marginalised*, writes: “It is not a loss but an investment to stir the strength in Chuyia and Shakuntala to challenge the authority of Madhumati.” (71) Narayan epitomises the Gandhian ideals of the social reform. He stands for thousands of young men who were influenced by the principles of Gandhi at the time. He regards Gandhi “. . . a modern-day prophet.” (Water 92) He starts on a new sojourn of Gandhian ideology, leaving behind the world of rotten and stale customs and conventions.

The novelist raises the major issue of widow-marriage here. In Hinduism, widow-marriage is not favoured by the ancient sacred books. In the pre-Independence era, once a woman was widowed, she was expected to lead a pious, disciplined and isolated life, repenting for what had happened was her own past sin. To think of remarriage was considered a heinous sin in itself. When Madhumati learns about Kalyani’s desire of marrying Narayan, she contemptuously disregards her decision: “. . . You will sink yourself and us! We’ll be cursed. We must live in purity, to die in purity.” (Water 169) The marriage of a girl was considered, and it is still considered a sacramental rite, but the widow-marriage was strictly prohibited since it was regarded to be a disgrace upon the family’s reputation. The irony is that a widower could marry twice or thrice or even more times, but there was prohibition even in those days on it, no sanctity of the religion was stained, but the marriage of widowed woman created tumult amongst the so called dominant religious and social elites. It exposes the dual character of such men. Sidhwa writes: “The Brahmanical tradition in the stri-dharma says a widow has two options: She can commit sati and mount her husband’s pyre, or lead a life of self-denial and pray for her husband’s soul. In some cases, if the family allows it, she may marry her dead husband’s brother.” (Water 184) In *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster, In Act I, Scene I, the marriage of the widowed Duchess is taken by her brothers as a disgrace to their family:
Ferdinand. You are a widow:

You know already what man is; and therefore

Let not youth, high promotion, eloquence—

Cardinal. Nor anything without the addition, honour,

Sway your high blood.

Ferdinand. Marry! they are most luxurious’

Will wed twice.

Cardinal. Oh, fie!

Ferdinand. Their livers are more spotted

Than Laban’s sheep. (24-25)

In the elite class of Indian society, there is strict prohibition of widow marriage whereas a widower has free will of remarrying, no loss of social or moral ethics occur in the later case. In post colonial period, Widows were dumped in the ashrams for being impure, inauspicious, but no such for the widowers. Innocent Chuyia curiosity exposes the bitter reality tyranny of the Brahmanical Patriarchy towards widowed women:

“Didi, where is the house for the 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 men 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.” (Water 97-98)

Shakuntala is an archetype character, one of the most noteworthy portrayals. She is submissive, pious and sanctimonious woman who turns to be the most assertive and rebellious, though to some extent. It is she who accomplishes the rebellion, initiated by Chuyia early in the novel, after her realization of truth and disillusionment with the old social practices. It is she who fosters Chuyia after her arrival in the ashram. She is another Bhagya for Chuyia, nurturing her like her own. When Madhumati sends Chuyia with Gulabi for prostitution in place of Kalyani, Shakuntala decides to save her from prostitution: “Shakuntala ran blindly through the dark gullies . . . Suddenly, Shakuntal spotted a boat with an odd splash of colour bobbing in it . . . [She] ran along the embankment, keeping abreast of the boat . . . stepped into the boat . . . hauled Chuyia onto the embankment . . . Whispering, “Chuyia? I’m here. You’re safe, you’re with me . . .” (Water 217-19) Gandhi’s words “Truth is God” dispels her doubts and dilemmas. Her resolve to entrust Chuyia to Gandhi, manifests her shattering beliefs in old ideals. She finds that “Chuyia’s only hope of rescue lay aboard Gandi’s train.” (Water 226) She realises that a new dawn has broken over, and Gandhi’s followers are the torchbearers of the new and progressive thoughts. One of Gandhi’s followers says “I am Gandhi’s follower. I see things differently.” (Water 219) After handing Chuyia over to Narayan she pleads: “Make sure she’s in Gandhii’s care.” (Water 228) Sidhwa highlights the changing outlook of the people towards the widows particularly under the impact of Gandhian ideology.

The initial part of the novel Water is dominated by Chuyia, middle part by Kalyani, the final part is dominated by Shakuntala. Fifth child of her parent, Shakuntala’s birth was treated as the arrival of goddess Laxmi. Being an intelligent girl, she was allowed to partici-
pate in all kinds of activities. She was married to a young widower, but the untimely death of her husband leaves her into the vortex of widowed life. The maltreatment by her in-laws made her leave her ‘home’ and to find a ‘home’ in the ashram “. . . she would be loath to leave.” (Water 176)

Sidhwa expounds on the life of forced asceticism led by the widows in the ashrams. Isolated, bereft and aloof from the main stream of life, the widows in the ashrams immersed themselves in worshipping the Lord Krishna as their divine spouse. Whatever written in the Hindu sacred books were the supreme truth for them, and compliance of its dictates was the utmost duty of the widows, a blind adherence. Shakuntala had deep faith in the teachings of these religious books whose “. . . obligation to pray constantly in penance for her husband’s death brought her solace.” (Water 66) Her unbounded faith in the Holy Texts was first fractured by Narayan who urges her on the loss of Kalyani: “One less mouth to feed, four saris, one bed to let—somewhere a corner saved for another widow. There is no other reason. Disguised as religion, it’s just about money.” (Water 209) Then, her faith verged towards its ultimate collapse when Sadanand, the priest, mentions her about Gandhi who listens to the voice of his own conscience. She asks Sadanand: “But what if our conscience conflicts with our faith? (Water 212) She is disillusioned. She realizes the inner truth of her life. She resolves for the emancipation of Kalyani, setting her free from the locked room, then, she makes Chuyia free from the clutches of her oppressors. She becomes instrumental in doing so. In The Fictional World of Bapsi Sidhwa, Amit Kumar Dubey writes: “Her decision to defy norms and be the agent of change is based on her realisation of the dignity of life, . . .” (111)

The role of reminiscence in the life of the widows has been employed by Sidhwa to highlight their pathetic conditions. All the widows in the novel live in reminiscence to escape
their saddened present life that is deprived of all sort of happiness. These women feel great nostalgia for their past life that is devastated by the sudden death of their husbands. Patirajji i.e. Bua is ever seen engrossed in the fancies of her past happy life. Whenever a listener is present to her, she begins reminiscing about her life in her village: “Plump white rasgullas, piping hot gulab jamuns. The saliva drolls in my mouth even when I think of it! Yellow ladoos, fragrant with saffron, dripping with pure butter. Cashew-nut fudge covered with gold leaf . . . Bua trailed off in ecstasy.” (Water 68) Madhumati remembers her past life: “Thakur Nirender went against the wishes of his entire family and brought me up as a son! I was the true Queen Bee . . .” (Water 84) Kalyani reminisces her sad fate that was quite akin to that of Chuyia’s. Shakuntala recalls her wedding feast: “. . . huge platters filled with fried, puffed up puris, spicy vegetables, fragrant mounds of saffron rice and all kinds of pickles, fruits and fresh palm toddy. Trays of almond and cashew fudge cut up in diamond shapes and steel thalis heaped with glossy ladoos and her mouth filled with saliva.” (Water 173-74) Chuyia recalls her village home. She wants to be “back in a maya teeming with loved ones, with gooseberry bushes and wild leeches–orchards that miraculously produced tart, unripe mangoes and ripe mangoes more delicious than the sweet ladoo Bua had chocked on.” (Water 138)

The novelist has skilfully woven the tale of Bua in the slender thread of the narrative. Bua’s terrible craving for ladoos stands for her deep yearning for her bygone days, a strong longing for emancipation of ‘Self’ which she asserts every now and then asking for any ladoo from other widows in the ashram. Bua’s iteration and reiteration of her desire for ladoo exhibits her growing urge for liberation. The pathos of the situation is delineated by Sidhwa:

The gob of fudge stuffed her mouth so she could scarcely breathe. As the glorious buttery sweetness from it swamped her taste buds, waves of delight
spread through her whole body and sent Bua reeling back into her past. Memories shaped themselves into images and scenes that transport her back across the span of years to her wedding day. (Water 121)

Laddoo given to her by Chuyia chokes. Dying Bua pleads: “I want another laddoo. I want a laddoo.” (Water 131) Bua dies, but she attains freedom from the patriarchal subjugation. On the other hand, her death poses questions on the social system that deprives widows of such paltry things.

Survival is the most important need for human beings. It becomes absolutely demanding when one is widow. Once a woman is widowed, she is deprived of her natal and in-law’s heritage. She is forced to live in widows’ ashram, and to support herself, she is either forced to prostitution or begging alms. The calamitous result of these women’s widowhood emanate in the form of their endless struggle for survival. Finding no way, these women are forced to begging, gradually eliminating their shyness and humiliation. Sidhwa highlights the heart rending fact about the widows: “The irony was that most of the widows, from villages in Bengal to neighbouring Bihar were from landowning families and were in fact accustomed to giving alms to the less fortunate. But that was long ago. (Water 117) The widows suffer all the privations and exploitations, both in and out of the ashrams. In Water, the widows living in the ashram sang the hymns of Lord Krishna and Radha asking them for the welfare of their benefactor, in lieu: “. . . the widows were given a cup of rice and a fistful of lentils for every eight-hour session of singing and dancing. For many widows, this was their only means of sustenance. On those days when a widow was too sick to perform, she starved.” (Water 60) The exploitation suffered by Bua, who had sung in prayers till her death, exposes the sad plight of the life of the widows. For “her lugs out” singing, Bua got only “A cup of rice and an occasional cowrie-coin flung at her?” (Water 143)
The widowed woman has to face extreme economic hardships in her widowed life. No sooner does she lose her spouse than she loses all the rights on her husband’s property whether she legally inherits it or not. In most of the cases, the in-law family tries its best to deprive her and her children from their rights; this makes the life of a widow more vulnerable and pathetic. The vulnerability of a widow does not end even after her death. The callousness and bitter reality of the human life is seen when the widows face a grave problem of Bua’s cremation because of the lack of money:

Shakuntala started to rise, but was stopped by Kunti who, turning to Madhumati, said coldly, “The money for the cremation?”

There was complete silence.

The widows turned and looked expectantly at Madhumati. She was ready with her excuse. “Every penny from Kalyani’s work goes to pay the rent.” (Water 135)

Sidhwa ponders over the sad plight of widows. She has made a genuine attempt to expose the mal-chauvinism, superstitions and bias treatment of the patriarchy towards the widows that has single-mindedly schemed their confinement under the boundaries of rigid customs. The patriarchy has codified women, especially widows, and has marginalised them. The mal-treatment being suffered by the widows can be understood when Chuyia is stuck in front of a vendor smelling the mouth-watering aroma of hot puris: “Get away!” the vendor shouted Chuyia, as if she were a stray animal. Chuyia shot back, “I have money.” She held out the small coin in proof. “Widows don’t eat fried food,” he said, spitting betel juice into a bowl. (Water 119) Sidhwa suggests how patriarchal social system was responsible for worsening the conditions of the widows depriving them from their fundamental rights as human beings, and by making them social pariahs. At the same time, she brings forth the far better
life of the widows and the progressive and egalitarian belief of the British. While travelling in
the carriage, Kalyani gets scared to find herself in the locality where the British lived. Nar-
yan dispels her fear of being watched by anyone. Narayan tells Kalyani: “They don’t care if
you’re a widow,” . . . and “. . . they don’t treat them like we do,” said Narayan. ( Water 154 )
The novelist shows the entirely different and respectful treatment of widows in the western
society.

In Hindu culture, life is guided and directed by ancient sacred books and scriptures. These holy books are replete with numerous myths and allegories which consider man and
woman equal, but ironically enough, woman is restrained in the chains of various obligations
which she is expected to fulfil in her life as an obedient wife. The various myths in Hinduism
exhort woman those teachings that belittle her status in comparison to her husband. The myth
of Shakuntala, the foster daughter of sage Kanva, is juxtaposed with Shakuntala in the novel
by Sidhwa to reveal the antiquity of the oppression of womankind. Shakuntala was given to
sage Kanva by her father, though in different perspective. But, Sidhwa shows the common
practice of Kanyadan in Hinduism at the time of a girl’s marriage. This ritual has been in
vogue from the Vedic age. The girl is gifted away by the father as if a commodity.

“Why did her father give her away to the sage?” Chuyia asked, not happy with
this bit of news.

“Sometimes fathers have to give their daughters away,” Shakuntala said gen-
tly.

“They shouldn’t!” Chuyia said, looking at the door to hide the sudden tears
that sprang to her eyes. ( Water 109 )
Sidhwa highlights the perennial inequity and injustice committed against womankind, irrespective of the class and status. In the myth, King Dushyanta refused to recognise impregnated Shakuntala as his wife. She was discarded and forgotten. The same fate occurs in the life of Shakuntala in *Water* who was left in the ashram and then forgotten by her parents:

“As fate would have it, King Dushyanta became so occupied with ruling his kingdom that he forgot all about Shakuntala.”

“Like you,” Chuyia said, getting her own back. “Everyone has forgotten you!”

Shakuntala was so taken aback, she didn’t know what to say.

“Why do you say that?” she asked quietly.

“Isn’t it true?” Chuyia said.

There was a pause during which Shakuntala shut her eyes. “What you say is true,” she said at last, her voice so meek and resigned that it shamed Chuyia. (*Water 110*)

Shakuntala’s plight was quite akin to that of the mythical Shakuntala: “She had gone from being adored to being reviled, looked upon as something filthy.” (*Water 175*) She was left in the widows’ ashram to lead an ‘isolated’ life among other widows. It shows the gritty realities of the plight of women in India.

The socially segregated widows suffer blatant discrimination in the hands of elite class like Seth Dwarkanath and Sadanand. These unfortunate women not merely underwent inhuman treatment but were sexually exploited as well. The travails of widowed life became more terrific when they were victimised sexually, or forced to prostitution to meet the needs
of their life. Widows, whose shadows were considered inauspicious, were ironically auspicious for satiating one’s lust. Sadananda, the priest’s carinal desire has been exposed by Sidhwa:

As the light shone through her damp sari, it outlined her thighs and legs. It gave him pleasure to watch her strong, shapely body. Her waste was slender above the rounded flare of her lips, her stomach flat. Her high breast made shapely mounds beneath her handsome shoulders, and her neck sat straight above the indentations of her collarbones; he wished he could bury his lips in the hollows. (Water 183)

*Water* by Sidhwa problematizes the oppressive machinery that marginalised widowed women in the guise of customs, rites and rituals. Sidhwa has skilfully and deftly brought forward the sad plight, predicament and heart wrenching condition of the widows in pre-independent India. She lays bare the double standard of behaviour of the society towards women. She has realistically portrayed the pathetic and miserable life of the widows, and has delineated the bias treatment and partial behaviour men toward widows in Hindu society, more especially in Brahmin society. The hardships and isolation of the widows’ life has been shown in the novel with utmost precision. At the same time, Sidhwa has exposed the hypocrisy of the elite class that manipulates in confining the women in the shackles of obscurantism. Widowhood, a natural phenomenon, is itself a great cause of incessant agony for the one who bears it, but it becomes all the more hellish and alienated because of the bias treatment of the patriarchy. The morbid side of Hinduism in 1930s has been exposed posing a serious question on its workings. Sidhwa ruminates on the deplorable state of widows’ life, oppressed in the name of rotten customs and irrational but deep seated cultural taboos. Through the rebellious steps of Shakuntala, Kalyani and Chuyia, and spread of Gandhian philosophy in the 1930s, Sidhwa hopes the emancipation and better fate for the so called baleful widows from
the cultural and social bondages who are victims of the so called sin of being widows. But, the fact is that in the 21st century of the Independent and progressive India, millions of widows are still leading an isolated life in various ashrams- be at Varanashi or Jagannath Puri or anywhere else in the country, segregated socially, starving and begging for arrangement of meagre amount of food so as to continue their hopeless way to their death without any hope.

*Water* can be appreciated as a feminist novel that broaches feminist issues of child marriage, exploitation of women at the hands of men and dual approach of society towards women. It divulges successfully the vacuousness of Hindu patriarchal system. The approach of patriarchy towards widowed woman is a serious indictment against the existing male oriented system, led by the elite class that ignores her existence at all as an individual. Sidhwa has questioned the continuation of age old social system seeking reform in the status and condition of widows in India. *Water* subtly mocks the exaggerated patriarchal restraints and authority that belittles female sexuality and virtue.