Chapter III
Plight of Women

Feminism as a movement has played a very vital role in projecting the suppressed status of women in the patriarchal society. In the domain of patriarchal culture, woman is a social construct, a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted. As Sushila Singh puts it in *Feminism and Recent Fiction* in English: “Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete. Women has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely has an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life” (Preface 7). Many contemporary writers have projected the plight of women based on caste, creed, religion and gender and are trying to suggest some pragmatic solutions to them. Though the conservative social norms and myths of feminine behaviour are challenged all over the world yet a change in the attitude of patriarchal society towards woman is at a snail’s pace.

Feminism is a highly innovative concept representing a significant departure from the traditional mode of critical evaluation. Feminism is generally seen as a struggle against all patriarchal and sexist oppression – a struggle for equality for women, an effort to make women become like men. Alice Jardine defines feminism as a “movement from the point of view of, by, and for women” (20). Chaman Nahal on the other hand, defines feminism as a “mode of existence in which woman is free of the dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious or ethnic group” (17).

Feminism is concerned with the emancipation of women by liberating them from man’s domination. It demands that women should be treated as autonomous individuals and not as passive objects; that equal attention and opportunities should be given to women for education and employment for their economic independence. What peculiarly signifies the situation of women is that she finds herself living in a world, where she is compelled to assume the status of the ‘Other.’ Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior to man. Legally she has been given equal rights with man, but the submissive and gentle nature of women embedded deeply into their psyche did not disturb the male-
dominance in the family. In patriarchal societies if she attempts to change this matrix of domination verses submission in the man-woman relationship, she finds herself in trouble. Earlier in literature also, women writers had to contend with the imposition of limitation to their education and their chances to publish and circulate their work. Today education provides them with the skills that make them better wives and mothers, but in the past they were to be educated according to the male notion of ideal woman – one who would support man in his public role while she remained silent and confined to the private world.

Most of the women writers who ventured into the public realm have been subjected to male disapproval. The list of women who received negative treatment at the hands of male literary establishment includes Margery Kempe in the fourteenth century, Jane Agnes in the sixteenth century, Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century, Harriet Martineau and Emily Dickinson in the nineteenth century and in our own time Kate Millet who wrote *Sexual Politics* (1970).

Recent developments in the literary and feminist theory have played a significant role in enabling us to reassess and re-interpret literature in a new light. The new explorations in the field of feminist criticism provide us with an opportunity to broaden our range of responses to issues of history, psychology and gender which have always engaged creative writers. Fruitful efforts of contemporary feminist critics like Elaine Showalter, Simone De Beauvoir, Mary Ellmainn, Adriene Rich, Toril Moi, Sandra M. Guilbert and Susan Gubar offer refreshingly new readings of the major writers established within the mainstream of literary tradition.

The term ‘feminism’ signifies the emergence of female power in order to get rid of their excessive and undue dependence on men. It is a worldwide movement to secure equality of women with men in enjoyment of all human rights–social, political, economic, moral, religious, educational, legal and so on. Feminism argue that woman should be left alone to live on her own strength and means to fight against the unjust system and obtain her own subsistence and thereby remove her dependent status. According to Simone de Beauvoir, a world where men and women would be equal is easy to visualize. Women reared and trained exactly like men were to work under the deplorable conditions and on lower wages.

Feminists contend that a change in women’s economic condition is not enough to transform her. Though this has been and still remains the basic factor in her evolution, the
new woman cannot emerge until the moral, social, cultural and other changes are brought about. Earlier liberty for woman was an abstract and empty proposition. They must break away from the limitations of their situation and work for their liberation. This liberation must also be a collective effort and requires, first of all, building a secure economic condition. Though there was no particular feminist theory as such, yet there are various perspectives. Each one attempts to analyze the topic of women’s oppression, its causes and consequences, and prescribed strategies for their liberation. However, the feminist theorist has only been to identify their approach as liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, socialist, and existential and post-modern. Each one of these is only a partial answer to the woman’s question. What is fascinating is how these provisional answers join together to explore the ways in which women have been oppressed and celebrate the ways in which many women have managed to take charge of their own destinies.

Feminist criticism is thus essentially a new way of reading and thinking about literature. The works of writers like Marie Ellmann’s *Thinking About Women*, Kate Millett’s *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* have stimulated feminist movement and encouraged feminist criticism. Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* posits that a work has to be placed in its socio-cultural perspective to be understood fully. She criticizes Freud and his psycho-analytical approach to literature which imposes sexual politics as a method by which one sex seeks to maintain its power over the other sex.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) plays an important role in understanding existential feminism. It has helped many feminists to understand the full significance of a woman’s ‘Otherness.’ Though radical, psychoanalytic and Marxist feminists have important things to say about the causes of women’s oppression, Beauvoir sees that none of them truly demonstrates why woman is always ‘the Other.’ She gives a classic exposition of women’s situation as, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (295). She argues that the emancipated woman should seek professional autonomy and financial independence. She also encourages women to be intellectual and to study writers such as Emily Bronte, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield who have been able to probe the sufferings of women.

For postmodern feminists, like Helene Cixous, feminist – writing is not merely a new style of writing but it is “the very possibility of change, space that can serve as a springboard
for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural standards” (47-48). The feminist movement till today does not have a common, well-accepted positive ideology, ultimate goal and right direction. Ann Curthoys, the well-known Australian feminist thinker, says aptly:

Many feminists are in the process of defining their dissatisfaction with the women’s movement as it is ….There is dissatisfaction with many of the women’s centres and services set up by the movement dissatisfaction with the level of feminist theory we are developing, dissatisfaction that as the woman’s movement grows in size, it is diluting its perspectives, programs and aims. These dissatisfactions can be summed up as a loss of direction which itself is a losing sight of our ends, our ultimate goals. We have not, a clear notion of our feminist utopia (20-21).

In fact, feminism should mean the march towards ‘wholeness’ through resistance, resilience, and determination and not simply a war against patriarchy. It should aim at seeking authentic selfhood and not simple, traditional womanhood.

Feminism questions what is usually associated with ‘feminine.’ Feminine is identified with passive, timid, servile, docile, emotional, conventional and all that denotes a subordinate and secondary position. Feminism is an assertion of the value of woman as woman, and expression of struggle to establish a woman’s identity. Feminism questions this notion of feminity as well as other dominant, phallocentric ideologies and patriarchal attitudes. Feminist writers have touched upon various aspects of women’s life. They being aware of women’s subjugation, try to break off the fetters which are instrumental in their victimization. That is why in feminist works, emphasis is on the emancipation of women. They portray women characters who are becoming aware of their individuality and who strive for self-fulfilment. They portray their struggle against oppressive patriarchal domain and their longing for a new social order with changed standards where women can be their true selves. Feminist writers “instill a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on them” (Das 15).

Bapsi Sidhwa has been highly regarded as a feminist post-colonial author who effectively addresses the issues of cultural difference and the place of women in Indian and Pakistani society. Critics have noted both The Pakistani Bride and An American Brat for their
examinations of cultural conflict and their strong characterizations. Sidhwa is a feminist and realist. One can see in her women characters the strength of passion, the tenderness of love and courage of one’s convictions. They struggle to overcome the hurts of time and escape the grip of fate in whose hands they are often mere puppets.

Bapsi Sidhwa has very realistically illustrated women’s plight and exploitation in the patriarchal society. Men establish their masculine powers and hence fulfil their desires by brutally assaulting women. Men as aggressors feel elated and victorious whereas women endure the pain and humiliation of the barbarity enacted upon them. But Sidhwa, as a novelist, talks of emancipation of women.

As Sidhwa is in her real life, so are her women characters in her fictional world. They are fairly beautiful, intelligent, modest but strong-willed, and courageous. Rebellion is not in their nature. They try to cope with the parental, societal and cultural pressures in their life as much as they can but when they find their very life or identity in danger, they throw off all shackles and fight with full force to foil the foul attempts of their adversary. Their tactics vary with the nature and strength of their opponent.

Though by using English as her medium of expression, Sidhwa indubitably belongs to an elite circle, yet she is able to give voice to the marginalized figures of Pakistani society, mainly women. She poses a strong counter-voice to the dominant patriarchal narrative which has subdued women’s roles to the absolute minimum, through silencing female literature in one form or the other. She rigorously questions the histories and the assumptions of contemporary Pakistani society and literature. The austere attack on a number of beliefs is somewhat softened by her candid and wry humour which pervades a substantial amount of her work. The witty humour is used as a tool to open up a space which allows her to criticize without causing undue offence.

All her novels are gynocentric but her second published novel, The Pakistani Bride, based on a real life story, is an exclusive paean to women’s zest for life, their adaptability and indomitable courage. In this novel Sidhwa confronts a number of issues faced by the members of general populace of Pakistan during and since the Partition of 1947, with a particular interest in the condition of women who are positioned at different levels in the class structure. This novel is a damning indictment of the Kohistani community in particular and the Pakistani society in general with regard to its brutal treatment of women. The women
are marginalized and have, in a number of cases, no say in decision-making processes or actions which ultimately seals their fates. Women are denied an influential voice both in national issues and those which concern the power over their every day lives. Sidhwa’s female characters in *The Pakistani Bride*, as in all her other novels, are as strong if not stronger than the men who run their lives in the way that they resist the limitations of the definition of ‘woman’ which circumscribes their identity. “*The Bride* is dedicated to the incredibly simple, deprived, and courageous women of this magnificent country” (Paranjape 94).

It is mainly a story of two brides – Zaitoon and Carol, but it is prefaced with a short account of yet another bride, Afshan. She, at fifteen, is given in marriage to Qasim, a boy of ten, just because her father Resham Khan has not been able to repay the loan he took from the boy’s father, Arbab, a year ago. So Afshan is sold into marriage to compensate for her father’s failure to repay the money. This is not a pre-arrangement settlement, but is done to prevent a blood feud. The amount of money is not significant; it could have been ten rupees or a thousand rupees, the daughter was available anyway. This transaction reveals the status of woman as nothing more than a bargaining commodity, whose role as such has already been decided. The full extent of this injustice is brought into focus when it is revealed that Qasim’s father “had thought of marrying the girl himself” (Sidhwa, *The Pakistani Bride* 8). Afshan becomes Qasim’s wife without knowing how close she had been to ending up as his step-mother. The entire matter rested in Qasim’s father’s hands and the decision could have gone either way and all without Afshan having any say in the matter at all. She is forcibly snatched from her family and dislocated from her home to a new environment which she now has to call the ‘home’. But she, like the other female characters, has the resilience to adapt quickly to her new environment and she easily wins the love of Qasim’s mother. Her feelings towards Qasim are maternal rather than that of the wife he expected. Scared stiff of his mature looking bride, the boy Qasim on his wedding night slips into a corner of the room and sobbing angrily falls asleep. Afshan lifts him to her bed, tucks his legs between her thighs and consummates her marriage in a way. She accepts her lot cheerfully. She helps her mother-in-law with domestic chores and occasionally joins her in punishing Qasim for his stubbornness. He protests, “I am your husband. How dare you!” (*The Pakistani Bride* 10)
Four years later, while Afshan is washing herself at the stream, Qasim sneaks up on her and grips her breasts. She slaps him hard berating him, “. . . you shameless dog, you jackal, you! I’ll teach you to be brazen. She wept with embarrassment, lashing out and hitting him wherever she could. Qasim scrambled from the rushing stream. He stumbled. Afshan fell on him with a stick, screaming abuse” (The Pakistani Bride 11). A stranger from the next village passing by the stream comes to her rescue. When he starts beating Qasim, he cries, “But she is my wife. Let go, she is my wife” (The Pakistani Bride 11). Afshan implores, “Yes, yes, let go, don’t touch him” (The Pakistani Bride 11). He releases Qasim but tries to molest Afshan. Qasim flings a large stone at him, and then another, and before the man can get back his wind, he, holding his wife’s arm, runs away. He is now a true husband. At sixteen he becomes father and in the next eighteen years he begets five more children but three of them die unfortunately. At thirty-four Qasim has only three children—two sons and one daughter. Of these the five-year-old girl, Zaitoon, is most dear to him. But when a smallpox epidemic breaks out in the village, Zaitoon is the first victim followed by other members of the family within a month. Qasim is the lone survivor.

Afshan’s story encapsulates women’s power of resilience. Her father has bartered her away and married her to a boy five years younger than her but she does not lose heart. She takes command of the situation from day one. She assists her mother-in-law in housekeeping, grooms her young husband and bears him six children. Unfortunately, neither she nor her children survive the ravages of the epidemic. Qasim goes to Jullundar, gets a job as watchman at a bank and lives there happily for three years. In the wake of Partition violence he kills one person and boards a train to Pakistan. Of thousands of people, sitting on the roof of the train, there are Sikandar, his wife Zohra with a baby on her lap and their little daughter, Munni. The train is ambushed near the border. Zohra and Sikandar are killed among others. Of the few lucky survivors there are Qasim and Munni. Munni clings to his legs saying, “Abba, Abba, my Abba!” (The Pakistani Bride 29) For a moment Qasim is at his wit’s end. Her size and sobs remind him of his own little Zaitoon lost long ago but he suppresses his nostalgia and moves forward untangling the girl’s grasp mercilessly. She stumbles after him, screaming with terror. Fearing the danger from the noise he stops. He takes out his knife to cut her throat but she presses herself to him for protection. He closes the knife. The girl looks up and in her tear-stained face he finds a resemblance to his daughter. He kneels before her
and the girl looking into his eyes, says, “You aren’t my Abba” (*The Pakistani Bride* 30). He draws her to him and asks her name and her father’s name. She says she is Munni and her father’s name was Sikandar. Moved to tenderness Qasim says, “Munni, you are like the smooth, dark olive, the zaitoon, that grows near our hills. . . The name suits you. . . I shall call you Zaitoon” (*The Pakistani Bride* 30). Munni thus becomes Zaitoon and Qasim, her new father. By thrusting herself on Qasim, she makes it amply clear at the very beginning that she is not going to be cowed down by adverse circumstances. She is of humble origin but being naturally equipped with courage and forbearance, she can overcome any difficulty in her life.

At the refugee camp in Lahore, Qasim befriends Nikka Pehelwan who has come from Pannapur in Amritsar. After spending a few days at the camp, they settle in Qila Gujjar Singh. Nikka’s childless wife, Miriam, treats Zaitoon like a daughter. She is sent to a school. She passes class three. But at eleven when she becomes pubescent, Qasim in deference to Miriam’s wishes stops sending her to school. Miriam trains her in household chores and in her spare time takes her out to her neighbours. On these visits Zaitoon gets a glimpse of the “fecund, fetid world of mothers and babies” (*The Pakistani Bride* 55).

Sidhwa gives a very vivid description of how discrimination against women is practised inside the house:

The untidy row of buildings that crowded together along their street contained a claustrophobic warren of screened quarters. Rooms with windows open to the street were allotted to the men: the dim maze of inner rooms to the women—a domain given over to procreation, female odours and the interminable care of children. Smells of urine, stale food and cooking hung in the unventilated air, churning slowly, room to room, permeating wood, brick and mortar. Generations of babies had wet mattresses, sofas and rugs, spilled milk sherbets and food, and wiped hands on ragged curtains; and, just in case the smells should fade, armies of new-born infants went on arriving to ensure the odours were perpetuated (*The Pakistani Bride* 56).

Zaitoon is now sixteen years old and her father Qasim is nearing fifty. Age has made him nostalgic. He often talks about his past life in Kohistan and his accounts are so fascinating that Zaitoon sometimes has a yearning desire to see what she considers her native land. In her imagination she can see tall, light-skinned, proud, heroic and incorruptible men
living beside crystal streams of melted snow, with their bright, rosy-cheeked children and beautiful women.

Qasim arranges Zaitoon’s marriage to the tribal man. It is Miriam who brings out the contrast and points out how Qasim himself has changed, “they are savages. Brutish, uncouth, and ignorant!… most of them are bandits, they don’t know how to treat women!” (The Pakistani Bride 93-94) Whereas Zaitoon is brought-up in liberal ways of life in Lahore. She is educated and really belongs to the plains. Miriam is even prepared to adopt her as her own daughter since she has doubts about the ways of the tribals. She tries to explain this to even Zaitoon but Zaitoon does not listen to her. As she is young, she is guided by “visions of the glorious home of her father’s forefathers and of the lover her fancies envisaged” (The Pakistani Bride 98). Both Nikka and Miriam advise her to return to them if circumstances required so.

Thus begins the journey of Zaitoon into unknown yet romantic mountains, into the civilization completely different from the one in which she is born and brought up. The novelist brings into focus the old world of Kohistani mountain-life to which Qasim now returns after fifteen years of his life, where “we are not bound hand and foot by government clerks and police. We live by our own rules—calling our own destiny! We are free as the air you breathe!” (The Pakistani Bride 100) But he forgets that it is difficult and insecure world for his daughter, the bride to be of the hillman. There is shift not only in the scenario of the novel but also the tone of the novel. The novel which so far appears episodic, gets its central focus when the novelist introduces us to the inner world of the mountain life, especially to the life of the tribal women. Even before the marriage Sakhi the bridegroom is jealous of Ashiq who helps Zaitoon to scramble down the cliff. The writer describes Sakhi and his “growing feelings of humiliation and jealousy” (The Pakistani Bride 148) as he observes Qasim, Zaitoon and Ashiq making their way to their village. The tribal behaviour is further marked down in sharp words as the tribals peep through the window at Zaitoon, “the tribals hung around the wire-mesh window peering in as at animals in a cage… their avid, leering countenances… craning necks and faces wobbled for a moment, then, swearing and jeering” (The Pakistani Bride 152).

The writer again notices the differences between the two cultures and how Ashiq is worried about the safety of Zaitoon. Sidhwa marks out the old world of savagery into which
Zaitoon has to step in. Zaitoon herself is aware of this and says “I cross this spot and my life changes…. But the step into her new life had been taken a month back and she was moving fatefully on its momentum” (The Pakistani Bride 153). Although she is just sixteen yet she is aware of her predicament, she steps into the closed world of mountains almost the pathless wilderness. Here Bapsi Sidhwa comments, “Brown mountains rose endlessly, followed far up and away by endless snow. Before them stretched centuries of an intractable wilderness, unpeopled and soundless. . .” (The Pakistani Bride 154). The nature which is attractive and majestic is also terrifying and dangerously suffocating. Sidhwa emphasizes the two aspects of nature and symbolically presents the eternal adventure of man into the unknown and his struggle for the survival against the cruelty of nature. At one level Zaitoon’s struggle is a struggle of man against nature but at another level it is also the struggle of a woman against both man and nature.

Sidhwa sharply focuses on the significant events and situation of life into which Zaitoon finds herself. She is revulsed by the faces around her, the rubbery bread offered to her and the cave like huts instead of the rosy picture of her dreams. She is haunted by the unpleasantness around her and dreams about herself, “standing by the river, admiring its vivid colours, when a hand had come out of the ice-blue depths and dragged her in, pulling her down, down” (The Pakistani Bride 156). Her fear crystallizes. She senses the savagery of the people, their poverty and the harshness of their fight for survival. “Her mind revolts at the certainty that to share their lives she would have to become like them” (The Pakistani Bride 156). In her desperation she urges her father to take her back with him for she feels that “I will die rather than live here” (The Pakistani Bride 157). Bapsi Sidhwa places Zaitoon in the unfamiliar and savage surroundings and describes fully the mountain people and their life with great insight. The conflict at this stage is presented deftly. To Qasim the mountain man, his honour is dearer to him than his own life or his daughter’s life even though he has a nagging fear for the girl’s life. “Qasim had an unreasoning impulse to take her back with him on some pretext or other…. He should have listened to the child’s violent plea the night they arrived. His departure imminent, he felt he had acted in undue haste. Too late, he tried to fight this wave of sentimentality and fear” (The Pakistani Bride 166). But he seeks consolation in the fact that his own old fervent longing to be with his blood would be realized through Zaitoon’s marriage to Sakhi. Man’s wish to realize his own dreams even by
sacrificing his own child’s life to insecurity and hardships of the cruel traditions of the tribal men is fully explored by Sidhwa.

The first night of Zaitoon’s marriage reveals both the proprietorial lust and jealousy on one hand and sympathetic consideration for this delicate girl of sixteen in Sakhi. Sidhwa artistically and delicately describes the tragic and comic aspects of the first night of marriage. Very few women writers, whether Indian or Pakistani have endeavoured to describe the initiation into sex life of the young bride in such detail.

Sakhi’s sense of insecurity with this girl of the plains always surges up in him murderous instincts and he treats her cruelly. He frightens her to such an extent that her attempts to adjust herself to her fate appear futile to her. Sidhwa once again focuses on the enormity of Zaitoon’s situations, “The enormity of the change she faced struck her with brutal force. In an intuitive flash—sapphire eyes and ice-blue waters merged with the terror of her dream in the cave—it was an ominous presentiment” (The Pakistani Bride 167) when she mentions the Major for Sakhi to seek employment. She cannot understand Sakhi’s murderous jealousy and hate as she is brought up and educated in the liberal ways of life in Lahore. The savage subjugating will of Sakhi frustrates her. Bapsi Sidhwa fully explores this moment in the life of Zaitoon who finds herself at a point of no return. Her fantasy shatters like the ice broken into tiny pieces at the first touch of reality: “The past week had been too much for her: her emotions had soared to unaccustomed heights of adulation, tenderness and passion; her dreams had rocketed to the stars. Then came the mercurial change that sent her crashing back into blind chasms” (The Pakistani Bride 169).

The episode of Sakhi hitting the animal almost to death and his mother Hamida’s attempt to save the animal, his beating his own mother and even Zaitoon brings into focus the tribal manhood and the barbarous views of honour. The woman whether she is a mother or a wife is savagely ill-treated. It is man against woman and there is no code of respecting the mother or an elderly woman. Man is always the master even though he may be a child, as Sidhwa points out at the beginning of the novel, describing Qasim the child husband of his grown-up young wife. There are no laws of civilized life for tribal men. They may kill their women for dishonour caused to them but do not hesitate to rape women if they get such an opportunity as is revealed by the novelist—an attempted rape of Qasim’s wife earlier and Zaitoon being raped by the two tribal men of some other group. Woman is a mere commodity
and she is exploited both sexually and also for household work. She is not treated as an individual in her own right, nor given any status even as a mother. She is simply a slave to the men of the family and they beat her any time even without reason. Bapsi here shows that the Pakistani Muslim husband considers infidelity in his wife a sin which must be punished either by maiming her or by killing her. The Major makes this clear to Carol who is a privileged bride since she is an American white woman, but she too is doomed if she is unfaithful and her husband comes to know about it.

When Zaitoon realizes that her attempt to adjust herself to tribal life is not appreciated and that her husband Sakhi is always jealous and keeps beating her for her innocently gazing at the jeeps in the distance, she resolves to run away. She is not ready to be a martyr to the imaginary insults and infidelity that is attributed to her by her husband. His thoughtless, cruel and inhuman behaviour drives her to despair and to the only alternative of running away. Sidhwa presents a powerful character in a sixteen-year-old Zaitoon who prefers death in the mountains to being beaten into a spiritless woman like her mother-in-law Hamida. She is aware of the fact that escaping in the mountains is almost impossible as they are treacherously pathless. She does not even know where she would be going at the end of her journey. She simply feels that if she could escape and cross the bridge, she may get help. In order to avoid being caught up by the members of her family, she chooses an indirect, difficult and untrodden path and consequently is lost in the mountains, “Zaitoon knew that somewhere in the serpentine vaults of the ravine and in the glacier-riven valleys she had lost her direction, and that the river gorge could be hidden anywhere in the myriad furrows between the mountains… mountains closed in on her like a pack of wolves” (The Pakistani Bride 197). The mountains whose magic and splendour she had loved and admired are now her enemy. For nine days and nights she wanders the mountains like a wounded animal hunted by the tribal men. At times she has a glimpse of her life’s end at the hands of her husband, “she feels him move and her destiny is compressed into seconds. She hurtles in a short-cut through all the wonders and wisdom of a life unlived. Instantly old, her tenure spent, she is ripe to die” (The Pakistani Bride 235). She is well aware of Sakhi and his pride and sense of honour, “It is not an act of personal vengeance; he is dispensing justice—the conscience and weight of his race are behind him” (The Pakistani Bride 235). Zaitoon is trying to escape from her prison-like conditions but it is not escaping to freedom as she
knows that one can not cheat one’s fate. The next moment she instinctively and courageously hides herself to survive. She succeeds in her struggle to reach Major Mushtaq and his military camp. Zaitoon’s odyssey from the plains to the snow mountains and back to the plains is symbolic of the inner journey of the young woman from the fantasy world of love, romance and heroes to the harsh realities of life, where man is the hunter and exploiter, cruel and inhuman treating woman and animal alike. It is a barbaric world of uncivilized people.

After placing Zaitoon’s plight at the centre of the novel Sidhwa juxtaposes the civilized Carol’s life with her Pakistani husband Farukh. An ordinary young American working in a store, Carol has not completed her studies. To her, Pakistan appears to be a land of romance and adventure, and Farukh seems an answer to all her drudgery in life. Though she fails to understand the twilight world of veils and zenanna but after a year or so she slowly realizes that “the repressed erotic climate was beginning to affect her. In the States, what she had thought was unique attraction for Farukh had in fact been her fascination with the exotic, and later the attraction had disconcertingly extended itself to include his friends and relatives—and even acquaintances” (*The Pakistani Bride* 176). At first she hardly understands that her casual American ways in a country where few women were seen unveiled, attracted the men. She is flattered by this attention and does not realize that for the men it is merely a passing affair. She is impressed by “the bronze, liquid-eyed men” (*The Pakistani Bride* 177) of Pakistan. Though she tries to conform to the norms of the country, Farukh’s jealousy combined with the flattering attention she receives shatters her resistance when she comes across Farukh’s friend Major Mushtaq. The Major is an attractive, handsome young man who seems to have stepped out of the romantic poetry. In Farukh’s absence she flirts with him and thinks that she had really fallen in love with him. She decides to divorce Farukh and marry Mushtaq since “growing up in the 1950s, Carol was inexorably conditioned to marriage. She had only one recourse with which to reconcile her feelings and her actions. She had found her true love. He must marry her” (*The Pakistani Bride* 179). Little does she realize that in Pakistan men marry their cousins and as Mushtaq explains:

In spite of what you hear about our being able to have four wives, we take marriage and divorce very seriously. It involves more than just emotions. It’s a social responsibility ... For one thing, at the very least, my wife’s life would become unbearably confined, drab and unhappy. And we’re cousins, you know. Our families
would make my life – and yours – miserable. We’d be ostracised” (The Pakistani Bride 181).

For Mushtaq, it is one thing to have an affair with the American woman who is liberal in her ways, since she could fulfil his need for a woman in the loneliness of his remote posting, and another thing to have a permanent relationship of marriage with the wife of his friend. Besides, he cannot even dream of forsaking his wife and children and distinctly points out the difference between the two ways of life: “You’d find her life in the zenanna with the other women pitifully limited and claustrophobic – she’d probably find yours – if she could ever glimpse it—terrifyingly insecure and needlessly competitive” (The Pakistani Bride 180). After being rejected by Mushtaq, Carol turns back to Farukh, thinks of having children, and making her marriage successful. She even dreams of going into the tribal world but this fantasy too, is shattered when she come across a young tribal woman’s head bobbing up and down in the dark waters of the river. In a crude and painful manner, all her romance and fantasy, are crushed to disillusion. Mushtaq asserts that jealousy is universal and “women get killed for one reason or other … imagined insults, family honour, infidelity …” (The Pakistani Bride 223) all the time in Pakistan. Now Carol faces the realities of woman’s life in Pakistan and comprehends fully the fallacy of her fantasies.

The novelist poignantly describes her disillusion with life: “Her fantasy—set off by his startling handsomeness, his intense animalism, and her fascination with tribal lore and romantic savagery – took wing” (The Pakistani Bride 221) only to be shattered into thousand pieces. She could not even salvage her marriage to Farukh as she has glimpses of the horror of generations of cloistered womanhood. The encounter with the floating face of a tribal girl triggers the avalanche of emotions bringing her firmly to the ground. She realizes the difference between the two cultures: “A branch of Eve had parted some way in time from hers” (The Pakistani Bride 227). She becomes fully conscious of her plight “her independent attitudes would get her killed!” (The Pakistani Bride 227) Sidhwa brings into focus the issue of Pakistani women’s plight through the eyes of an outsider, an American bride of the Pakistani man. This is apprehended through the plight of Zaitoon: “That girl had unlocked a mystery, affording a telepathic peep hole through which Carol had had a glimpse of her condition and the fateful condition of girls like her” (The Pakistani Bride 228).
Carol’s life so far has been a hopeless drift but Zaitoon with courage and faith deflects the direction of her life. Carol, who is from the free world, can think in terms of her individuality but Zaitoon has no such notions. She does not wish to live at the mercy of the cruel men. She instinctively chooses to be herself even like the eagle bird with broken wings trying to fly into the sky. Her fight is against both man and nature which she can vanquish through her sheer will-power (Khudi), “the strength of nature—a force, perhaps of God, within one” (The Pakistani Bride 229). The writer quotes the poet Iqbal here:

Khudi ko kar buland itna,

Heighten your ‘Khudi’ to such majesty,

ke har takdeer say pahaylay

that before every turn of fate

Khuda banday say khud poochay,

God himself asks man –

‘Buta teri raza kya hai?’

‘Tell me, what do you wish?’ (The Pakistani Bride 229)

The two cultures cannot meet, be they of Pakistan and America or the mountains and the plains. Carol’s conflicts are resolved when she decides to accept her failure in her marriage to Pakistani Farukh and decides to go back to her own culture and land. Zaitoon’s successfully getting the help from across the bridge, from the Major, resolves her struggle and she may see the light of the rising sun in her own land.

The novelist has used the bridge as a symbol of the divide between the two cultures. Zaitoon of the plains awakens the tribal women to comprehend their plight which is crystallized in Hamida whose sympathies are with Zaitoon and who does not want Zaitoon to be caught and killed by her own men. She feels, “Anyway, this would teach the menfolk a lesson” (The Pakistani Bride 216). Silently but forcefully Zaitoon has established her individuality. We have the picture of Zaitoon moving from passivity to active assertion of her will against the cold, cruel men and rigid patterns of existence. She escapes to the powerful and terrifying mountains and ultimately defying her fate she crosses over to free and normal life of civilization. What is adventure for both Carol and Zaitoon into the romantic rosy world
of fantasy turns out to be a voyage into dark and cruel layers of humanity. Both women do not wish to become simply the victims of trends and traditions of culture they do not understand nor belong to. In a broader sense the initial thrill is followed by a seizure of panic at the realities of life and the women rebel and try to break off the shackles of another culture and attain freedom and their own individual self. It is a struggle to seek freedom from negation of life and freedom to attain one’s identity.

The images and glimpses of the life of other women in *The Pakistani Bride* are not less encouraging. Hamida, Miriam and Shahnaz counteract the patriarchal power in their own ways. On hearing the voice of the ox being mercilessly beaten by her son, Sakhi, Hamida not only rushes to the spot but flings herself at him, wedging her body between him and the ox. The cruel Sakhi does not spare even his mother and hits her on the shoulder and the legs with his staff. She gets badly injured but she succeeds in saving the life of the ox. Again, she feels great sympathy for Zaitoon though she has run away. The very thought that Zaitoon will be killed by her son and his clansmen fills her with disgust for their code of honour:

Honour! She thought bitterly Everything for honour – and another life lost! Her loved ones dead and now the girl she was beginning to hold so dear sacrificed. She knew the infallibility of the mountain huntsmen. The old woman was overcome by the memory of her three dead sons: the weight of each child in her body for nine months, the excruciating pain, drudgery, sweat: and scant years later, the heartbreak when, one by one, each of her sons was carried home on a crude stretcher swinging from the men’s shoulders, their faces grim with the weight of the corpse under an impoverished shroud. In each grief, a nameless dread: how many more lives would the dead one claim? The set faces of the men, their eyes burning with hate and a lust for revenge, their old make-shift guns forever loved and polished, the leather slings decorated with coloured bands and tassels, cherished even more for the men they killed. Men and honour. And now the girl... (*The Pakistani Bride* 190-191).

Miriam is thoroughly a domesticated woman. She regards Qasim as brother and though they live in the same house as one family, she seldom talks to him but when she learns of his decision to give Zaitoon in marriage to a tribal, she gets so overwrought that she uses harsh words not only for him but also for his whole clan. Her protest has no immediate
effect as Zaitoon is married to a tribal but on the very next day of the marriage Qasim realizes, “Miriam after all might have been right” (*The Pakistani Bride* 166).

Shahnaz’s profession as a dancing-girl demands that she dance before everyone who pays her money but it doesn’t mean that any Tom, Dick or Harry is allowed to use her as he likes, and when some lout like Nikka tries to do so, he is handled so tactfully that his attempt is foiled without causing any embarrassment. She entertains Nikka and Qasim with some songs and dance but Nikka is not satisfied. He wants to see her dance without clothes on her body and pays extra money for it. Shahnaz goes on taking off her clothes till she is stark naked. She dances erotically and teases them wantonly “secure in the knowledge of her inaccessibility” (*The Pakistani Bride* 78). Nikka and Qasim, with their carnal desires fully roused, want to fall on her to satisfy their lust but they find themselves utterly helpless as their doctored drink has fixed them to their place. They are not in position even to sit properly. Shahnaz and her so-called mother succeed in safeguarding their honour.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s third novel *Ice-Candy-Man* also represents a number of female characters who survive the chaotic period of 1947 in India, which can be registered as the period of worst religious riots in the history of India. Sidhwa has given a very realistic and transparent picture of carnage during Hindu-Muslim riots in 1947. The novel mirrors men becoming adversaries on the basis of their religion and also represents the changing political scenario of the country. Emotional turmoil, individual weakness, barbarities of communal riots and the brutalities inflicted on women amidst this iconoclastic ruthlessness and communal frenzy have been very realistically projected by the novelist. The whole story has been narrated by the female protagonist Lenny who related the horrors of violence and her personal observations and reactions. The protagonist not only observes but also analyses men’s lascivious and degrading attention towards women, voraciousness of male sexual desires, women’s plight as they are reduced to the status of sexual objects, and relates the peculiar disadvantages, social and civil, to which they are subjected.

Lenny as a narrator moves from one phase of her life, i.e., childhood to adolescence. During this journey, she understands the changes taking place in the society, men’s attitude towards women and women’s subjection. The whole journey helps her to develop a more mature vision towards life. She gives a closer look at the relationship between men and women which awakens her young mind to develop a vision of her own.
The narrator relates her life as “My world is compressed” (Sidhwa *Ice-Candy-Man* 1). As a physically handicapped girl, her world is restricted to the four walls of the house. She spends most of her time with her Godmother. She terms her Godmother’s room as, “My refuge from the perplexing unrealities of my home on Warris Road” (*Ice-Candy-Man* 1). As a child she had no inclination to have female possession though from time to time she was advised to have one by the women of her family. She recalls: “I can’t remember a time when I ever played with dolls: though relatives and acquaintances have persisted in giving them to me” (*Ice-Candy-Man* 138). This reflects the sexual identity thrust upon her time and again. Her schooling is stopped as suggested by Col. Bharucha, her doctor, because she was suffering from polio. He concludes, “She’ll marry—have children—lead a carefree, happy life. No need to strain her with studies and exams” (*Ice-Candy-Man* 15). Lenny concludes that the suggestion made by Col. Bharucha sealed her fate. It reveals the limitations associated with a girl’s life. Development of feminine virtues with female nature and carrying out the responsibilities associated with the domestic affairs are considered as the only aim for women. Patriarchal society considers women as physically weak to venture into the world outside the four walls of their houses and too deficient to make important decisions. Hence women are relegated to the domestic sphere where they have to accept the hegemony of a male counterpart. Since ages it is considered that it is a woman’s duty to tend house, raise children and give comfort to her family. Shashi Deshpande, a contemporary novelist, suggests that women should be given enough space to realise their true personality. She points out in an interview to Geetha Gangadharan: “The stress laid on the feminine functions, at the cost of all your potentials as an individual enraged me. I knew I was very intelligent person, but for a woman, intelligence is always a handicap. If you are intelligent, you keep asking, “Why, why, why” and it becomes a burden” (Deshpande 253). Simone de Beauvoir also holds the same view about social conditioning. According to her, mothers are highly responsible for inculcating feminine traits of submission and self-abnegation in women.

Lenny as a girl learns that marriage of girls is of utmost importance to their parents. Independence and self-identity are meant for men. The intense concern for her marriage even in her childhood puts Lenny in dismay. She states, “Drinking tea, I am told, makes one darker. I’m dark enough. Everyone says, ‘It’s a pity Adi’s fair and Lenny so dark.’ He’s a
boy. Anyone will marry him” (*Ice-Candy-Man* 81). She recognizes the biological exploitation of women as she grows. As a child she cherishes her mother’s love and her father’s protection but the whole episode of *Ice-Candy-Man* and Ayah destroys all her conceptions about love. She was shocked to perceive *Ice-Candy-Man* pushing his wife Ayah into the business of prostitution. Lenny concludes:

> The innocence that my parents’ vigilance, the servants’ care and Godmother’s love sheltered in me, that neither Cousin’s carnal cravings, nor the stories of the violence of the mobs, could quite destroy, was laid waste that evening by the emotional storm that raged round me. The confrontation between *Ice-Candy-Man* and Godmother opened my eyes to the wisdom of righteous indignation over compassion. To the demands of gratification—and the unscrupulous nature of desire. To the pitiless face of love (*Ice-Candy-Man* 252).

The site of Hindu and Muslim women being raped during the riots petrifies her. She watches men turning into beasts leaving no room for moral and human values. Women including Ayah were becoming prey of men. Lenny was shocked to see the human mind which was built of nobler materials getting so easily corrupted. Men were declaring superiority over each other by sexually assaulting women. Women had nothing in their favour. Envy, malice, jealousy, rage for personal power and importance in men were leading to violence and injury. Shashi Deshpande states:

> Rape is for me the grossest violation of trust between two people. Whether it is someone in the family or your husband or any other man who commits a rape, it destroys the trust between men and women. It is also the greatest violence because it is not only the woman’s body but it is her mind and feeling of her right to have a control on her body which is gone (qtd. in Pallavi 126-127).

Sidhwa has also projected the aftermath of such inhuman and barbaric acts against women after the riots. She has projected the farcical social behaviour which victimizes women alone for any bodily violence and leaves them to wail with their bitter experience which gives them a feeling of pain and sense of loss. Lenny is shocked to see the changing attitude of men
towards one another. Religious enmity easily erased the threads of friendship. She concludes: “And I become aware of religious differences. It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves — and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols” (Ice-Candy-Man 93).

She knows that men of different religions can never become friends again. Their only motive in life was to take revenge. Lenny concludes, “Now I know surely. One man’s religion is another man’s poison” (Ice-Candy-Man 117). Lenny is not ready to accept the prevailing social condition. As a grown-up woman she analyses the whole situation and draws some conclusions. She decides to hunt for her lost Ayah, who also becomes a prey of the Hindu-Muslim riots. Lenny decides to talk to her mother regarding Ayah. She wants to save Ayah from the terrible profession of prostitution as told by her cousin. Lenny decides, “If those grown men pay to do what my comparatively small Cousin tried to do, then Ayah is in trouble. I think of Ayah twisting ice-candy-man’s intrusive toes and keeping the butcher and wrestler at arm’s length. And of those strangers’ hands hoisting her chocolate body into the cart …. I decide it’s time to confront Mother” (Ice-Candy-Man 241). Due to Lennys continuous persistence at home, she is informed about Ayah’s whereabouts. The novel ends with Ayah being sent back to her parents’ home.

Throughout the novel, Lenny appears as a courageous and bold girl who is not ready to succumb to the communal frenzy. She is inquisitive, daring, demanding and lively. Sidhwa has given a feminist touch to the character of Lenny who moves forward in life despite various hindrances and obstacles. As she observes the lives of various women around her, she understands the limitations associated with women’s lives in patriarchal society. She is shocked to see men betraying and sexually assaulting women and exploiting them. Sidhwa as a writer encourages women to transgress the line of marginalization.

Lenny’s mother is another interesting female character in the Ice-Candy-Man. As a servile housewife, she limits her life to the four walls of her home. She reticently follows her husband, who is the decision-maker of the family. Lenny’s mother is a representative of those traditional women who as subordinates never express their desire to establish themselves as better human beings. Sidhwa seems to illustrate through Lenny that men have to dilute their ego and women have to eschew the image of weaker sex or deprived femininity. Mindsets need to be changed in order to establish equality between the sexes. The
patriarchal society should perceive women beyond the roles of daughters, wives and mothers. Traditional male fantasies have created a particular image of women to suit their interests—submissive, servile, docile and self-abnegating. These fantasies have become alive, as women have been meticulously trained by the patriarchal/social system to assimilate them. A big transformation is required at the social level, which will acknowledge women as human beings with souls, desires, feelings, ambitions and potentials. Simultaneously women should utilize their potentials beyond their domestic life to assert their individuality. The novel *Ice-Candy-Man* projects through Lenny’s mother that women should have a purpose in life besides domesticity which should be developed by them to the best of their abilities. Women need to liberate themselves from the constraints of ‘womanliness’ which will erase the existing discrepancies regarding their marginalization. Lenny’s mother exhibits a change in her personality by the end of the novel. She becomes acquainted with the political changes occurring in the country during India-Pakistan division. She emerges as a social worker. Along with Lenny’s Electric-Aunt, she helps the victims of 1947 riots. She provides people with petrol who wanted to cross the border and helps the raped and exploited women. Lenny’s mother shows a lot of similarity with Bhabani Bhattacharya’s female character Monju in *So Many Hungers*. Monju appears as a fuller and maturer woman by the end of the novel. In the beginning she projects the womanly traits of being happy and content with her life and family. But gradually, with the passage of time, the pathetic incidence of Bengal famine and pictures of human life transform her. She learns to think beyond the realms of her own life and as a human cannot remain blind to and detached from the miseries and traumas of others. With a soul to feel and a mind to think it is very difficult to shut oneself behind the door when people are screaming for help and rescue. Similarly Lenny’s mother could not resist herself from helping the victims of 1947 riots.

Oppression of women, which is central to the narrative in *The Pakistani Bride* is dealt with in *An American Brat* also, however briefly. This novel is deeply concerned with gender inequalities and oppressive practices under Islamic rule in Pakistan. Sidhwa strongly condemns the Hadood ordinances and the Zina ordinance introduced by General Zia. These were grossly unfair to women and often perpetuated crimes against them by enabling the male offender to go free while the female victim was punished. Also, women who had
enjoyed equal witness status under the previous law were discounted by fifty percent under the new laws.

The novel discusses in detail the closed attitude of the community which does not permit Parsis to marry non-Parsis and which excommunicates any woman who marries a ‘non’ while permitting a man to remain within the community even if he marries a ‘non’. Sidhwa is concerned with the way women are treated by the faith, which seems biased and unfair. Sidhwa points out that the community refuses to change, not permitting conversions either. When Feroza wishes to marry David Press, an American Jew, Zareen flies out to America in order to stop such a horrendous move which would cut off her daughter from her faith, heritage, family and community. While in America, for the first time, Zareen finds herself seriously questioning the ban on inter-faith marriages. She ponders: “Perhaps the teenagers in Lahore were right. The Zoroastrian Anjuman in Karachi and Bombay should move with the times that were sending them to the New World…. The various Anjumans would have to introduce minor reforms if they wished their tiny community to survive” (Sidhwa, An American Brat 288). Zareen is happy that a debate was taking place to discuss these issues and finds herself aligned with the ideas of the liberals and the reformists. But her happiness at possible reforms is short-lived. Following her return to Pakistan after engineering the break between Feroza and David, she finds that the debate, “instead of bringing about the reforms she had thought were inevitable, had only entrenched traditional norms. These educated custodians of the Zoroastrian doctrine were no less rigid and ignorant than the fundos in Pakistan. This mindless current of fundamentalism sweeping the world like a plague had spared no religion, not even their microscopic community of 120 thousand” (An American Brat 305-306). This commentary on the Parsi religion and the opinions are undoubtedly expressed by the author. Feroza is unfazed by the renewed rigidity of her religion. Now in the West, she has matured enough to realize that no one could take her religion away from her as she always carried its essence in her heart and therefore did not need to go to a temple to worship. Thus the scope of the novel includes an unbiased view of religion and gender politics in patriarchal and fundamentalist Pakistan. The novel also talks of how the new generation of Parsis in post-Partition Pakistan are forced to re-assess their chances of survival in the country under such circumstances, where they are increasingly marginalised.
An American Brat, like Sidhwa’s other novels, is a fine combination of ethnography and autobiography. In recapturing the religious beliefs, the rituals, and the life-style and the Parsi idiom, Sidhwa talks of what she knows best, being a Parsi herself. She, like her protagonist, is the ‘other’ in Pakistan, in more senses than one. ‘Othered’ she is since she is of the minority Zoroastrian community living in Islamic Pakistan, and doubly marginised because of her colonial education which puts her among the elite of the once colonized nation. Her marginality becomes more pronounced as she is a woman in a traditionally patriarchal Asian society which forces the women to take a backseat in the socio-historical context of the nation. The voices of the protagonist Feroza and the mother Zareen are the voices of the marginalized Asian women who protest the narrowness of religious and social attitudes towards women and are pleas for more liberal and understanding socio-religious communities.

Feroza’s journey to America serves the novel in two ways. Firstly it is her journey towards self-discovery and secondly it also serves to give the protagonist precious objectivity which enables a fair evaluation of both the societies that she is affiliated to. The separation from home and family, which results from her move to America, enables not only self-knowledge but also helps Feroza to put her existence as a member of the minority Parsi community in Pakistan, in perspective. Her break with David Press is that separation that the modern feminist narrative insists on as the first step towards self-discovery. Her life falls apart just as unexpectedly due to the break with David. But Feroza realizes that her healing can take place only in America and that there was no going back to Pakistan for her. Her repudiation the traditional Asian manner of defining her social identity through her sexual maternal roles is obvious when the narrator points out that her friends’ preoccupation with children, servants, clothes and domesticity did not interest Feroza at present. Along with this understanding comes the knowledge that she could think this way only because she was in America. In Lahore, the pressure to get married would have made such thoughts impossible. She analyses the reasons for her decision to stay in America and justifies them in an articulate manner that would have been impossible for the shy girl who set out from Lahore a year or two ago. She realizes: “These and other constraints would crush her freedom, a freedom that had become central to her happiness. The abandon with which she could conduct her life without interference was possible only because of the distance from her family and the
anonymity America provided” (An American Brat 312). Feroza is intensely conscious of her privileged status and values granted to her in the West. Now she is a changed woman vastly different from the innocent girl of the novel’s beginning. Now she is eager to exercise the infinite options that America offers her. She decides that since she always carries the Holy Fire of her religion in her heart, it is unnecessary to confine the practice of her faith within the stuffy Parsi religious establishment in Lahore. Thus we see that Sidhwa raises the issue of male dominance and oppression of women in this narrative too. The minorities in Pakistan in general and the Parsi community in particular are marginalised.

As a scriptwriter of Water, Bapsi Sidhwa exposes the inherent indifference, fatalism and violence latent in Orthodox Hinduism. Water is all about Indian widows in the 1930s and how they were made to live in the widow houses. Water fearlessly attacks the enslaving hypocrisy of a patriarchal tradition that has developed over thousands of years of socio-economic imperatives and now disguises itself as religion. The novel throws light on exploitation of widows by rich Brahmins. The book also tries to show love between Narayan (who is educated) and Kalyani (who is widow) but the main aim of the novel is to show exploitation of women especially widows by other people and how they are dragged into prostitution.

Water delves into the most controversial issues including patriarchy, religion, corruption, poverty, child prostitution and forbidden love. These issues are brought to light through the stories of three widows: Chuyia, a child widow who breathes life into the ashram; Kalyani, a beautiful young widow, who falls in love with a reformist law student Narayan and Shakuntala, a devout believer in the traditions who struggles to make sense of the realities that surround her.

The book opens in pre-independent, tumultuous India. The year is 1938, Gandhi is jogging the Indian people from their apathy urging them to fight against British rule and to relinquish archaic Hindu laws like child marriage, the caste system etc; an eight-year-old Chuyia has just become a widow after the forty-four-year old man her parents married her off to succumbed to the deadly typhoid. Chuyia hardly even remembers being married to the man, but as tradition demands, she has to accompany his dead body to Varanasi, where he will be cremated at the Holy Ghats and after the cremation she is expected to live in a widow’s ashram. Chuyia is transported from a child’s carefree life and a loving family to a
widow’s ashram on the fringes of society. Still years away from a proper understanding of the ways of the world, she is told that she no longer exists as a person – all because of the sudden death of a husband she had barely even met. Once a widowed woman is deprived of her useful function in society – that of reproducing and fulfilling her marital duties.

The ashram is not a pretty place. The widows are expected to shave their heads, give up all their material possessions and clothe themselves in a plain white cotton sari without the benefit of even a blouse or the privilege of one meal a day. On festival days they are given paltry alms by temple-goers and on regular days they are given a cup of rice and a fistful of lentils for every eight hour session of singing and dancing in temple. For many widows, this is their only means of sustenance. A widow who is too sick to perform has to starve.

As a widow, Chuyia is not allowed to touch non-widows. She has to take care that even her shadow doesn’t fall on them because she and her shadow are considered polluted. She is expected to spend most of her time inside the ashram, praying or fasting in atonement for whatever sins caused her husband’s deaths. The Hindus believed that widowhood was the direct consequence of a sinful past life. As widows were not allowed to remarry, eight-year-old Chuyia could very well expect to spend her entire life confined to the ashram.

Slowly, Chuyia overcomes her sense of dislocation, makes friends with other women in the ashram and stirs a few heckles with her directness in situations where others simply follow the letter of the ancient texts. “Where is the house for the men widows?” (Sidhwa, Water 81) She innocently asks at a gathering, producing instant shouts of outrage. However, the child’s words have an effect on the middle-aged Shakuntala, who tries to conquer her own inherent conservatism by questioning the scriptures. Meanwhile, a progressive-minded young idealist named Narayan falls in love with Chuyia’s friend Kalyani, a beautiful widow whose earnings as a sex worker help in running the ashram.

When Chuyia’s father tells her “You are a widow now” (Water 32). She asks “For how long, Baba?” (Water 32) How can we expect a girl of eight years who is just not aware of marriage, to accept the widowhood. The male domination and prevailing superstitions have made woman so hard hearted that she becomes cruel towards her own sex. Madhumati, a fifty years old widow, is the ruler of the dilapidated ashram. She is very cruel towards the widows but shows so much affection and concern for her parrot, Mitthu. It is ironical that even a parrot has better status than a woman. Madhumati establishes all the rules in the
ashram given by our patriarchal society in the holy texts. Most of these holy texts are written
by men and as the holy texts say: “A wife is a part of her husband while he’s alive…and
when our husbands die, God help us, the wives also half die. So, how can a poor half-dead
woman feel any pain?” (Water 42) Madhumati is called as a ‘fat cow’ or ‘beached whale’
because she has turned a widow, Kalyani, into a prostitute only for the ashram’s basic needs.
When Madhumati comes to know that Kalyani wants to get married, she says, “Shameless!
You’ll sink yourself and us! We’ll be cursed. We must live in purity, to die in purity” (Water
144).

Almost forty years ago, Madhumati had faced the same situation. When she became
widow, she was raped by two men, was shorn and beaten and taken twenty miles into the
wilderness. She was saved by Gulabi. She was brought to the ashram.

Another poor widow, Bua, comes from a family of landowners who has hounded her
out of her house when her husband dies. Bua becomes widow when she is about thirty five.
She has sung her lungs out till she is seventy, only for a cup of rice and an occasional cowrie
flung at her.

Shakuntala is married to a young widower. Her mother-in-law is hopeful that
Shakuntala will be the instrument by which her son would fulfil his debt to their forefathers
by reproducing sons. As the years pass, she becomes increasingly hateful towards her barren
daughter-in-law. A man is not questioned for his impotence. Shakuntala has just turned thirty
and her husband dies. Now “her only useful role, that of wife and producer of sons, was gone
forever” (Water 149). She is not only viewed as responsible for her husband’s death but also
as a threat to her husband’s family. She feels that all eyes are watching and waiting for her to
commit some sin that will bring curses on them and consign her husband to hell. That is why
she has come to the ashram.

Kalyani’s fate is similar to that of Chuyia’s. Kalyani’s mother dies before she has
reached her first birthday. Word of Kalyani’s beauty had spread and she is married off to the
highest bidder, a man of sixty, when she is six. After her husband’s death her head is shaved
but Madhumati allows her to grow her hair back because she wants to force her into
prostitution. Narayan and Kalyani decide to marry each other but their dreams are shattered
when Kalyani comes to know that he is the son of Seth Dwarka Nath, who is one of her
clients. She calmly walks into the river and drowns herself. On the contrary Narayan’s father
says, “Our holy texts say Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want, and the women they sleep with are blessed” (*Water* 174).

Cracking a whip on the male domination, the writer narrates the sorry and pathetic state of women. The widows assemble in a temple and their chorus is full of sad tones. They are socially ostracized, ill-treated and considered as bad omen. As a shopkeeper in the market makes a remark, “They shouldn’t allow widows to run around like this. They bring bad luck to our business” (*Water* 60). Even laughing and dancing is a sin for them. They can be abused as a prostitute. Ironically the people who groan at their sight during the day, sleep with them at night. The novel ends with escape of Chuyia and Narayan. But the condition of other widows remains same.

The novel *Water* focuses partially on the physical agony of females in denial of proper clothing and feeding to them and wholly on the mental agony which they speechlessly suffer in silence. Nobody wants to suffer but woman unwillingly with mute protest suffers when no other alternative is given. How can we expect Chuyia to protest against child marriage at the age of six, which was basically her parents’ duty to save her from tentacles of social evils. Right to indulge in and enjoy carnal pleasures is the sole right, religiously preserved for male, female merely subjugates to blind passion of man. Though the conservative social norms and myths are challenged all over the world yet a change in the attitude of patriarchal society towards woman is at a snail’s pace. And a society cannot progress so long as its females are underprivileged and suffocated. The book, *Water*, is very fluent and will bring the reader to an unknown world inside a different and unthinkable culture. How can a father abandon his child for good? In the name of what are the women forced to live a life of penitence just for being so unfortunate that their husbands have died so soon? How marriage with a person whom she does not love is going to make her luckier? A really interesting and reflective reading, it will touch everyone’s heart.

Sidhwa exposes the patriarchal practices of the society which marginalize their growth and development and also represents women’s psychology that has been toned by centuries of conditioning. Hence, we can conclude that Sidhwa as a writer has a constructive approach towards women’s predicament. By leading a contented life they paralyze their lives but if they desire they will have option to break through their plight and get opportunities for betterment. Hence we see that all her novels end on a positive note and no woman character
is found as a defeatist in her works. It matters little whether they succeed in changing the course of their life or not. What is remarkable is that they never yield. They always strive to come out of their plight. They protest and fight against injustice, exploitation and oppression with vehemence and show the way for other women so that they may move forward from their degraded and tormented state to start their lives afresh. Zaitoon in *The Pakistani Bride* manages to save her life despite the looming threat. In the same novel, Carol, an American girl who is equally oppressed in her married life, decides to break free and returns to her own American culture. In the same way, Ayah in *Ice-Candy-Man* is liberated from the Hira Mandi, a notorious place for prostitution and sent back to her family in Amritsar. *An American Brat* shows that the protagonist Feroza in spite of enormous pressure of her family to return to Lahore and her failure in her first love, decides to settle in America. And Chuyia, too, is escaped in the end of the *Water*. Hence we find that Sidhwa’s women are strong-willed, assertive and courageous. They resolve their crisis in their own way.
WORKS CITED


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