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FEMINIST READING OF BAPSI SIDHWA'S NOVELS 'ICE-CANDY-MAN', 'WATER' AND  
DEEPA MEHTA'S FILMS – 'EARTH AND WATER'

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ABSTRACT

Bapsi Sidhwa, a Pakistan born novelist and Deepa Mehta an India born Canadian film maker are an interesting artistic duo. Both are the admirers of each other. They made genuine contribution to the feminist narrative, former through fiction and latter through films. Both of them are known for their social concerns especially about the women of the Indian sub-continent. They are the champions of women's cause and hit out fearlessly at the phony, untruthful patriarchal mind set prevalent in the society. Mehta made a film 'Earth' based on the novel Ice-Candy-Man written by Sidhwa. Whereas Sidhwa wrote novel 'Water' inspired from a film of the same name by Deepa Mehta. It's a very uncommon literary activity. All four texts under study take up the issue of women of the Indian Subcontinent. An elaborate investigation about the women's position in society from Stone Age to the modern times and consequent advent of feminism is dwelled upon in detail. Light is thrown on the three waves of feminism. Sexual politics, vengeance upon women's body, sexual growth of a girl child, victimization of women, traditional image of womanhood, powerful resilience on the part of women and the plight widowhood etc. are brought to the forefront. In this paper an attempt is made to explore and analyse the feminist perspective in all the four 'gynocentric texts' by putting them under the scanner of feminism.

**Keywords:** Feminism, gynocentric texts, sexual politics, male chauvinism, widowhood.

Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa and Deepa Mehta had made a genuine contribution to the feminist narrative, former through fiction and latter through films. This paper gives an insight into the four selected texts under the scanner of feminism. An elaborate and extensive investigation is made about the issue of feminism from the Stone Age itself. During the Stone Age, spade and hoe were the only implements used by humans. These implements established woman's strength for gardening. They gathered nuts, seeds and wild plants. There seem to be some equality between the two genders. Man hunted, woman used to remain at home to take on the task of domesticity which included productive labour; making pottery, weaving and gardening. Hence woman played a large part in economic life. With the dawn of agriculture, people started accumulating resources for the first time and with this an imbalance emerged. Also with more technological changes such as

the advent of copper, tin and iron, woman's fate took a turn. A woman who had occupied a good position in the Stone Age seems to give way to man. Maternal authority diminished and paternal authority started ruling the roost. A woman was confined to domestic duties. Man became everything while woman was reduced to a trivial entity. However, with the passage of time, efforts were made to establish equality between the two sexes which slowly but surely led to the advent of ideology of feminism.

### **Advent of Feminism**

Feminism is broad and complex ideology having variegated meanings. It is a term frequently used in everyday life. Though there is not a single definition that could define feminism completely. Some of them are: "Feminism is a doctrine advocating social, political, and all other rights of women equal to those of men" (dictionary.com). Talking about feminism Rengin Ozan writes "The term feminism describes the utopian view of the equality between men and women in equal terms of what both gender are able / expected to do, in terms of personal characteristics, actions and lifestyles. Feminism allows women to step outside their culturally created gender roles and perhaps take on a job or activity or lifestyle that is not traditionally female, and thus allows for the freedom of choice, which is what we think feminism is at the core, the power of choice and individuality free from gender norms and cultural expectations."(84) As a movement, feminism vehemently opposes the gender stratification in all its forms. Feminism promotes social, political, economic and sexual equality for men and women. Most feminists believe that men and women should not be judged on the basis of sex. They should be judged who they are as an individual. Feminists strive to fill the chasm that divides men and women. To understand feminism some attention is given to understand the concept of feminine principle. In this regards Ranchan and Razdan state, "The feminine principle manifests itself as sex, as womanhood, as devotion, and surrender to the masculine and finally as that which makes us accept life as life, without reference to the shadow world of ideas" (47). It is imperative to throw some light about the different waves of feminisms.

### **First -Wave Feminism**

'First-Wave feminism' refers to the period of feminist activity during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century throughout the world, particularly in the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands and the United States. It focused on women's suffrage i.e. the right to vote.

### **Second -Wave Feminism**

'Second-Wave Feminism' started in early 1960s and lasted 1980s. It raises the issue of women's social and sexual concerns. Second wave feminist voiced to uncover the patriarchal influences not only politically, socially but also about their sexual existence. They challenged the prevailing notions of the women's role in the family, work place and society. They criticized the sexual division of labour and voiced for promoting the women's equality in labour market. They addressed the issues like equal pay, employment and educational opportunities, reproductive rights of women.

### **Third-Wave Feminism**

'Third-Wave Feminism' identifies several aspects of feminist activities. It started with realizing the fact that second-wave feminism has failed to address and incorporate the voices of young, queer and non-white women. It was the movement of women of many colours, ethnicities, nationalities, religion and cultural backgrounds. It is clear that the history of women from times immemorial has been restrained by innumerable principles and prejudices cultivated by patriarchal society, mechanism of patriarchy, the cultural mind set of men promulgated sexual inequality. A male dominated society has been stifling women's capacity to be independent in thought and action. Bapsi Sidhwa in her novels and Deepa Mehta in her films have exposed the patriarchal society. Women in both the novel as well as in the film, take the mechanism of patriarchy head on. Since the proposed texts deal with women of the sub-continent, it is imperative to have an insight about the status of women in the Indian scenario.

### Women's Status in Ancient India

In order to understand the feminist perspective in the proposed texts, a need is felt to acquaint with the status of women in ancient Indian society. Most scholars are of the view that the women held an elevated position in ancient India. During Vedic period, women held similar position as men possessed. Women who were inclined to religion wore sacred thread and also were taught mantras of the Vedas. Women of Kshatriya caste got martial art training. They were very skillful in arms training. The Rig Veda says that the wife and husband are equal halves of one substance; they are equal in every respect; therefore both should join and take equal part in all works, religious and secular. But the status of women declined during epic period. In Ramanaya, two incidents, Sita's *Agni Pariksha* and her banishment to the forest do throw some light on the subjugation of women.

### Women in the Manu Samhita

But Manu Samhita, written long after Vedic periods is replete with derogatory statements about women. Film *Water* by Deepa Mehta begins with epithet from Manusamriti. The film *Water* as well as the novel of the same name deal with the issue of widowhood in the times of 1930s India. The 2000 years old sacred texts by Manu, the Hindu progenitor of mankind writes that a virtuous wife is one who after the death of her husband constantly remain chaste and had to lead a life of an extreme depravity. The hypocrisy of religion is exposed by both Mehta and Sidhwa, former through visual images and latter through the words.

### *Ice-Candy-Man* and the *Earth*: A Feminist Perspective

*Ice-Candy-Man* as well as well *Earth*, the film version of it deals with the theme of partition. In both these texts it is the woman who performs and controls the action. Both Sidhwa and Mehta, raise women's issues to the forefront. The issues such as violence perpetrated on women during partition in various blatant forms are brought to the surface in *Ice-Candy-Man* by Sidhwa as well in its cinematic adaptation the *Earth* by Mehta. The worst victim of the partition was a woman. Ayah (Shanta) both in the novel as well as in the film, represents those ill fated 83000 women (55000 Muslim, 33000 Hindus and Sikh women) who were abducted, raped and were kept as forced wives during partition. Thousands were killed by the people of faith other than theirs. Thousands were killed by their own fathers, brothers and their relatives in the name of honour. Revenge of all sorts was inflicted on women's body irrespective of religion. In the name of honour women were sacrificed. Describing one such incident Urvashi Butalia writes "In one of these villages, Thoa Khalsa, some 90 women threw themselves into the well in order to preserve the 'sanctity' and 'purity' of their religion, as otherwise they would have had to face conversion... the tales of women's sacrifice occupy an important place... It is they who are seen to have upheld, by offering themselves up for death, more particularly 'heroic death,' the 'honour of the community'". (12-24)

### Women as the Victims of Male Chauvinism

Women of all religion became the victims of false male chauvinism. The women characters in the novel, be it Ayah, Lenny or Godmother, all exhibit an extraordinary courage, resilience and individuality not to be easily subjugated. It is their sheer valour that they exposed the patriarchal prejudices rampant in the contemporary society. Sitting on the fence, Sidhwa gives an authentic account of partition in its flagrant nakedness and brutality. All her characters represent endurance; their capacity to fight and survive. They personify the extra-ordinary resilience of women in the times of utmost difficulty. Inter-racial harmony of pre-independence is cracked in backdrop of partition.

### Lenny: The Girl Child Narrator and her Sexual Maturation

Both Sidhwa and Mehta has done a commendable job in bringing forward the social, religious and political upheavals of the time through the eyes of small polio struck girl named, Lenny ,a young Parsi girl growing up in Lahore. It is an audacious attempt on the part of Sidhwa to depict the process of sexual maturation of a young girl Lenny in the country like Pakistan. By making Lenny as the narrator of the novel, the writer puts her weight and validity to the feminine perspective. *Ice-Candy-Man* being a feminist text involves

actions centering round women protagonists. There are women who acquire the attributes of heroism and grandeur, unlike that of male discourse in which women remain the beneficiaries of male bounty and bravery. The novel very boldly delineates her sexual maturity. Though the sexual maturation is not shown in the film because of the time constraint.

#### **Ayah: An Epitome of Female Resilience**

Ayah (Shanta) is perhaps the most influential character in the novel as well as in the film. She is the major female voice in both the novel as well as in the film. *Ice-Candy-Man* is essentially her story. It is the story of her world surrounded by men belonging to different social as well religious strata. Like a magnet she always attracts different males like iron flints as they come in the radius of her charm. She is like flame of sensuousness and female *joie de vivre* around whom the male moths linger constantly and long for the sexual warmth she emanates. Her influence over them extends to such a measure that they readily decide to stop the political discussions for her sake. Ayah has tremendous impact on Lenny, another female protagonist. She infuses the idea of independence and about making choices in Lenny. She has the strongest influence on Lenny. Ayah knows herself well, and she is confident enough as an individual, who cannot be taken advantage of. Ayah is the formative influence on Lenny.

#### **Lenny's Mother: Traditional Image of Womanhood**

Lenny's mother in both the film and the novel sticks to traditional image of woman hood. She conforms to the conventionally established symbol of femininity. She represents the conventional view of fidelity, faithfulness and servitude which are attributed to women as their finest qualities. She yields to the whims and fancies of the man she is married to. She tolerates male superiority. Sidhwa presented her as the woman adapted to live in her domestic habitat. But remaining rooted to her home; she displayed an extraordinary courage to save Ayah. She exhibited an exceptional humanitarian outlook even though she and her family members were in extreme danger. She displays the most beautiful feminine quality of compassion, helpfulness and courage during the time of extreme crisis.

#### **Feminist Reading of the Film *Water* and the Novel *Water***

*Water*, the film as well the novel deal with the issue of widowhood in pre-independent India of 1930s and take on the issue of feminism in both the texts. Mehta's film *Water* and its novelized version *Water* by Bapsi Sidhwa reveal the important issue of widowhood. In ancient India an extreme solution to widowhood was to burn the wife of deceased on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. Both the film as well as novel bring forth predicament of widows in pre-independent India of 1930s and the awful condition they are forced to live in. Mehta and Sidhwa, the former with visual images and the latter with words expose the distortion of religion by fundamentalists for their own personal gains. As David F. Burton says, "Water is set in sacred Hindu city of Varanasi in the 1930s and examines the plight of a community of socially ostracized widows. Their lives are governed by many social and behavioral restrictions such as taboos against remarriage and physical contact with high-caste Hindus." (2)

The film *Water* by Mehta begins with an epigram on the blank screen. "Widow should be long suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste. A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband dies goes to heaven. A woman who is undutiful to her husband is reborn in the womb of jackal." The Laws of Manu Chapter 5 verse (156-161) Dharamashastra (Sacred Hindu Text). Inequality and degradation of women is almost sanctified in Hindu religion. Manu Samriti says: "Never trust a woman. Never sit alone with a woman even if it may be your mother, she may tempt you. Do not sit alone with your daughter she may tempt you. Do not sit alone with your sister, she may tempt you. And same Samriti continues, "*Na streeswadantriyamarhathi.*" "No liberty for women in society." Women are never fit for independence. (Manuscript 9:2-4). Widows were treated as *Kulachani* (an evil omen), an economic burden. Mehta and Sidhwa took it on stride to hit hard at this age old rotten tradition.

As the film opens, Chuyia is accompanying her dying husband, unaware about her future. He dies and she becomes a widow. Her head shaved, bangles broken and is brought to widow ashram at Vrindavan. Her

father tells her, Chuyia, "Child. Do you remember getting married? Your husband is dead. You are a widow now" (Water 32). Chuyia becomes widow at the tender age of eight when she doesn't understand the meaning of marriage. The patriarchal society from ancient time had been in a habit of throwing blame on women. She ceases to be even human and is reduced to be a mere object.

#### **Chuyia's Passage into Widowhood: A Tormenting Episode**

After the death of Hira Lal, Chuyia's father declares that her husband is dead and she has become a widow. The child innocently asks him for how long, realizing not the concept and widowhood at that time. Later Chuyia's mother-in-law did not waste time to jerk the *mangalsutra* off her neck and the beads scattered on the ground. Little Chuyia is shaken. She seized Chuyia's hand and violently smashed the red glass bangles with a piece of brick. Chuyia's father Somnath sees tormenting ritual with agonizing pain and watched all this with utmost sorrow while Hira Lal's mother blames the howling child for a karmic debt of past sins that had deprived her of her son. Chuyia was forced to live with other widows, Shakuntala, Patirajji, Kalyani, Kunti and many others, wrapped in white clothes with shaven heads except Kalyani. Chuyia's mother-in-law blames Chuyia the innocent child of eight years for being the reason of her son's death. This is contemptible, unbelievable and weird.

#### **Kalyani (Lisa Ray): A Victim of Religious Hypocrisy**

Kalyani, another important woman character both in the film as well as in the novel is an embodiment of womanhood. She is exploited by the people who are always there masked in as the well-wishers of the society. They distort religion to their petty interests. It is the economic vulnerability which forces Kalyani into prostitution. As Malini Bhattacharya states: "Kalyani, who has been forced into prostitution, a fate which has not been unusual for economically vulnerable women in Widows ashram" (81). She is stunningly beautiful young widow with long black traces. She is the bread winner for the ashram. To look attractive her head is not shaved. She is forced into prostitution to support the ashram.

#### **Shakuntala: A Widow Torn Between Religious Faith and Human Desires**

Shakuntala (Seema Biswas) is middle-aged widow, living in the ashram. She is enigmatic, considerate and devout Hindu widow dwelling there. She is torn between her religious faith and human desires. She takes on Madhumati, the head widow to save Chuyia as well as Kalyani. She defies Madhumati and frees Kalyani to have her desires fulfilled. She is a mother figure to Chuyia. It is Shakuntala who makes a plan to save Chuyia and ensures her rescue to board Gandhi's train. It was Shakuntala only who consoles Narayan when Kalyani commits suicide. Shakuntala is an embodiment of womanhood having her faith rock solid even in the times of extreme adversity. She did not lose faith and is determined to hand over Chuyia to safety. She acts like Chuyia's surrogate mother.

#### **Conclusion**

Bapsi Sidhwa and Deepa Mehta are the artists of immense repute. Both exposed the society's callous behavior towards women. All the four selected texts are truly 'gynocentric texts' All their women characters do not lose faith, be it Ayah of *Ice-Candy-Man* or Shakuntala of *Water*. The novel *Ice-Candy-Man* and in the film *Earth*, addressed the issue sexual politics. All the women characters seem to assert their individuality. Ayah, Godmother, Lenny in the novel *Ice-Candy-Man* and Kalyani, Shakuntala and Chuyia in the novel *Water*, do struggle to establish their individuality against the backdrop of male dominion. Even Madhumati, the caretaker of the ashram was once the victim of patriarchy. The women characters in the novel *Ice-Candy-Man* refuse to sacrifice everything at the altar of patriarchy. 'Water' the film by Deepa Mehta and its novelized version is an extraordinary attempt to depict the plight of widows in India who yearn for liberation of their body and soul. Both are the champions of women's cause and hit out fearlessly out at the phony and untruthful morality prevalent in society.

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