

**CULTURAL HEGEMONY AND ASSERTION IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S
WATER AND INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *THE BLUE-NECKED GOD***

**Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.)**

By

Preethi. V

(18MPENF006)

Department of English

**Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for
Women, Coimbatore – 641 043.**

July 2019

DECLARATION

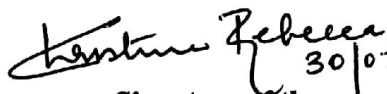
I declare that the dissertation entitled "**CULTURAL HEGEMONY AND ASSERTION IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S *WATER* AND INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *THE BLUE-NECKED GOD***" submitted by me for the degree of **Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.)** is the record of work carried out by me during the period from August 2018 to July 2019 under the guidance of **Dr. (Mrs.) Chitra Sivasubramaniam**, Associate Professor, Department of English and has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree, Diploma, Associateship, Fellowship, Titles in this university or any other University or other similar institution of Higher Learning.



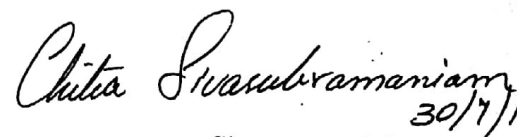
Signature of the Candidate

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "**CULTURAL HEGEMONY AND ASSERTION IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S *WATER* AND INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *THE BLUE-NECKED GOD***" submitted for the degree of **Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.)** by **Ms. Preethi. V** is the record of research work carried out by her during the period from **August 2018 to July 2019** under my guidance and supervision, and this work has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree, Diploma, Associateship, Fellowship, other Titles in this university or any other University or other similar institution of Higher Learning.


30/07/2019
Signature of the

Head of the Department


30/7/19
Signature of the

Supervisor

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher expresses her gratitude to **Padma Shri Dr. P. R Krishnakumar**, Revered Chancellor, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, for all the good wishes towards the successful completion of the study.

The researcher would like to acknowledge her heartfelt thanks to **Dr. (Mrs.) Premavathy Vijayan**, Vice Chancellor, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, for her constant motivation towards academic performance.

The researcher would like to thank **Dr. (Mrs.) S. Kowsalya**, Registrar, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, for extending full support for the successful completion of the study.

The researcher would like to express her thanks to **Dr. (Mrs.) K.T. Geetha**, Dean, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, for her encouragement.

The researcher would like to thank **Dr. (Mrs.) S. Christina Rebecca**, Professor and Head, Department of English, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, for extending her full support for the successful completion of the study.

The researcher wishes to express her heartfelt gratitude to her mentor, **Dr. (Mrs.) Chitra Sivasubramaniam**, Associate Professor, Department of English, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, for her

meticulous guidance and valuable suggestions towards the successful completion of this study.

The researcher extends her thanks to **all the members of the staff** of the Department of English, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, who rendered help whenever required.

The researcher would like to thank **all the staff of the library** of Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore for their support and help for the completion of the work. The researcher would like to extend her thanks to the library members of Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Anna Centenary Library and Connemara Public Library, Chennai, for providing secondary materials for the study.

The researcher records her special gratitude to her **beloved parents and friends** for their continuous encouragement and support in carrying out this work. Finally, the researcher thanks the **Lord Almighty** for the abundant blessings showered on her during the period of study.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

Page numbers with the abbreviation of primary source is given in the parenthetical reference wherever primary source is cited. The abbreviation which is used for primary source is:

TBG : THE BLUE-NECKED GOD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

S. No.	Contents	Pg. No.
I	Introduction	01
II	The Unheard Voice of Widows	21
III	The Agony of Widows	51
IV	Summation	76
V	Works Cited	91

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Women are considered as the best gifts of God to men. In Vedic period, it was a belief that women brought prosperity when she was properly treated and was considered to be the embodiment of Shakti, a symbol of purity and sacrifice which means 'power' and 'strength'. Women enjoyed all kinds of freedom; they were allowed to study, had a say in family matters, took important decisions of life and were allowed to choose their own husbands through the system called 'Swayamvara' as mentioned in the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Women were respected, given importance and perceived high standard of morality in the Vedic period.

Gone are the days when women are believed to be equivalent to Goddesses. Their condition slowly worsened and the status of women went down significantly in the medieval period as the Vedic principles of unity and equality started to fade off through the passage of time.

Violence against women takes a perturbing variety of forms, from conjugal violence and child marriages to rape, which make them mutilated and disturbed. Females fall prey to violence. The persistence of the problem has much to do with the fact that most of these physically and psychologically harmful customs are deeply rooted in the tradition and culture of the society. The brutality against women involves a defiance of fundamental human rights and is a barrier to the accomplishment of the goals of parity, growth and peace. In some cases, women are forced to marry at an early age of their childhood, before they are physically and mentally matured.

Women from the medieval times are bound in slavery by the chains forged by men and are caught in the death trap of religion. The root cause for this thought and practice is that women dedicate their lives to fallacy, customary beliefs, iniquity

customs, and religious zeal. Religion dictates the life of women throughout her life time. Men use religion as the tool to control the freedom of women and make them more dependent on men. Religion includes practices like child marriage, sati and female infanticide that hold no meaning. Yet people tend to blindly follow these practices and customs though they are dreadful, worthless and hold no value with the passage of time. Such customs and practices add to the predicaments of the people.

Religion views women as goddesses and culture views women as slaves but neither of it consider a woman to be human or individual. People in the name of religion brainwash the psyche of women so that their notions and verdicts are in orthodoxy with the notions of men. This advocacy has gone on from their very childhood. This is the reason as to why women in spite of their education do not dare to think or act contrary to the old traditions.

The hideousness of the woman's problem is not diminutive. Men and women are at odds with each other. Women are viewed of being victimized. Men and women communicate differently. Men believe that gender differences are based on biology, but women believed that differences are rooted in societal expectations. Both men and women imagine sense, identify, react, request, retort, adore, require, appreciate and worship differently. Men faultily desire that a woman should want what he wants and feel the way he feels, and men are brought up on the idea that women are their dependents which incite them to handle women in a tyrannical and an authoritative way without respect.

It is most unfortunate that women have to conform to the expectations of a man. Men consider themselves to be superior and so they treat women as inferiors. Women's freedom is exploited when they put themselves in the shoes of men. They are grounded to earth and oppressed. They are branded as the weaker sex.

Life of a woman is divided into three stages – childhood, womanhood (married life) and widowhood and she is not spared in any of these stages. The enslavement of a woman starts with her father; continued by brothers later taken over by the husbands and her plight continues to be the same as it goes on when her sons turn to be the deciding authority. In Indian society, the birth of a girl child is considered as a trouble and burden to the family and gender discrimination starts to rule her life whereas the birth of a male child is considered a boon to the family and to the society as well.

In India, the childhood of a girl varies from that of boy, where the girl is made to skip education to help her mother with household works. In some cases where girls are given education, they are not provided an opportunity to make use of it in their life time. Girl children are forbidden to play with their friends in the streets. When a girl is five years and more, her parents decide to get her married in order to reduce their burden of marriage and dowry expenses. Child marriage kills a child mentally, shatters her innocence, playfulness and cheerfulness. This leads the child to suffer for her entire life.

In case of having a girl child the parents consider the amount of money they have to save and pay for the girls' dowry and it is a fact that girls do not earn money for her family and will leave the house when she gets married. A girl child needs extra care in grooming in order to maintain her virginity and to fetch a good bride groom. Hence families prefer boys who will function as a retirement provision for the parents.

Marriage is not a union of minds, not of affections and not of individuals. It can be affirmed that marriage is between two families, same castes and two layers of status. The institution of marriage and marital life are restricted and hinder a woman's freedom and happiness. In the institution of marriage, prescriptions and prohibitions

for a woman which reduces her to a state of confusion where she is left to face more difficulties than her husband.

A woman becomes a prisoner in the hands of her husband and is viewed as a non-paid servant by her husband. After marriage a woman is transplanted into new house where she faces new characters – husband's brothers and sisters, their wives and husbands and close relatives. She, in the joint family is a tantamount to the circus feet of balancing on a thin wire, which is none other than her husband's love and affection for her. She endures problems like, losing her health, spending a lot of time in rearing the children and enduring humiliation and insults hurled not only by her angry husband but also by members of the family. On the other hand, it is ironical to state that the one and only problem faced by a man is the financial issue.

Women work for the whole day in order to run the family and nurture the children but her labour is demeaned while the mens' labour to earn a livelihood for the family is considered great. A woman's role is restricted to domestic lives and is confined to kitchen work, bearing and rearing children. Marriage and maternity have made their positions deplorable. Authority within the family is vested in men. A woman holds no space in economic and political activities. She is made to do all types of menial jobs. Even if she takes up a job, she is not left free to enjoy freedom.

For women, equality is proclaimed in principle but inequality reigns supreme in practice. Society looks at a woman who seeks divorce with dismay and disgust. In case of adultery, the society condemns her and does not accept her to be the victim of crime of adultery. She is compared to a broken pot. Attitude is not the same towards the man. He is unblemished, blessed with happiness and left to live the life he desires. When a woman goes barren, she should not go against the wish of her husband and she should not object her husband's decision of remarrying some other women.

Injustice is meted out to a woman when she seeks divorce on the grounds of impotency of her husband. She becomes an outcast in the society.

If a woman does not attain motherhood, the society neither looks at it as a health issue nor thinks about it as the inability of her husband but takes pleasure in blaming the woman. If a woman gives birth to a female child, she is scorned but the man who is responsible for the motherhood goes scot free. Any issue may go to an extent of divorce which may not liberate a woman from bondage. Even after the divorce, a woman cannot remarry and is treated with disdain. Whereas, a man can marry any number of times immaterial whether he is aged or has grown up children. A woman is expected to be a virgin till her marriage, but a man can have any number of concubines whenever he wishes, irrespective of his marital status. Throughout the lifetime a woman has to endure the sufferings and pain.

If a man dies before his wife, the condition of a woman's condition becomes worse than before. She is treated as untouchable and non-human by the society. In case of child widow, she has to endure the pain of widowhood at an early stage of her life. Widowhood is primarily a female phenomenon and is a mixture of the problems of a widow and a woman. It is always conjoined with deep sense of tremor due to the unexpected demise of the husband.

Millions of women endure the adversity of widowhood and usually tolerate its affliction for many years. In India, widowhood signifies the final and lowest stage in the life of Hindu women. Dr. Godavari D. Patil in the book *Hindu Widows: A Study in Deprivation* quotes the words of Canton and Merielli who "conceptualize Hindu widowhood as a life of agony, pain, suffering and austerity. It is a life which has been inflicted by social customs" (28). Upon the death of the husband, the wife is blamed for his death and she is rarely able to inherit the property; evicted from the house; denied the right to remarry; ostracized and a cast out and vulnerable to abuse.

Women of Indian society dread the experience of widowhood not due to the pain that arises from the loss of their husband but for the dehumanising rituals and practices that are being founded on the prevailing tradition of the people posing a bigger problem. Religion prescribes its way for widows. It is sanctimoniously stated that a widow cannot be purified by hundred baths. The preclusions set down for her is beyond imagination. Widows assert that it is a thousand times better to immolate oneself rather than enduring the woes and sorrows of widowhood. Young girls who are widowed at a tender age are no exceptions to the dictatorial terms of religion. In the case of a child the pain is doubled. The child is forced to live an austere life by avoiding the pleasures of childhood.

If a child widow remarries, the society springs up on its feet to look at it with disfavour. But there is no such disapproval for widowers who remarry. If a widow slips into a pit of immorality due to circumstances, she is condemned to live with a blemish till the end of her life. If a man commits the same mistake, he is left unquestioned and is free to remarry. In case of immorality among married persons, a man escapes the punishment and censure, but a woman is hounded of respectable society and her conduct is described as irreprehensible. The society sets moral principles which are quite different to a man and a woman.

Dr. Godavari D. Patil in the book *Hindu Widows: A Study in Deprivation* quotes the words of Greg who states that “Widowhood is an event that brings about the greatest change in the status of a widow, for it is often accompanied by deleterious consequences. This is not only expectations regarding the proper role of the widow” (27). The changes on the status of women that takes place is part of the process of transformation of a traditional Indian society. The society discovers its reflection in literature.

The literature on Indian olden times is a proof with opposing and inconsistent views on the position of women. Fiction is the most important genre of literature, which indicates and mirrors the conditions of society and principles of life. With the broad representation, novel contains the social, political and preceding historical perception of the writers and thus a writer, particularly a novelist, is called as socio-political being. The novelists not only employ expressions for the mere entertainment but also concentrate on the vital issues and problems of the society they dwell in. Furthermore, they add their involvement for the reformation of the society. While comparing men and women writers with each other the latter are aware of the dynamics between the society they live in and their role as a writer.

One of the most prominent features of the twentieth century English literature is the development of women fiction – the writers give their voice to the assertion, ache and need of women in the male hegemonic society. Women writers try their best to write about the problems of women who confine their position and status to the kitchen and the bedroom. Women writers started working for women's emancipation. They felt that they must not be blind or deaf to what they see and hear of the women's problems. So, they have risen to raise the voice in protest and revolt against the male hegemony. Writers like Arundhati Roy, Sudha Murthy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bapsi Sidhwa and Indira Goswami have mainly discussed about the theme of deprivation and sufferings of women in the society.

Arundhati Roy received an esteemed Booker Prize in 1997 for her novel *The God of Small Things*. The novel depicts the exploitation of a woman. The novelist through her women characters Ammu Ipe, Mammachi, Baby Kochomma, Rahel and Margaret Kochomma portray their suffering, submissiveness, humiliation and persecution in the male hegemonic society. The tragic tale of Ammu begins in her childhood and she is doomed to continue her life with unbearable nightmarish

experiences. Ammu and her mother suffer from the cruelty of her father. As a child she is deprived of education and becomes the victim of frustration. Roy indicates how a woman in the male centric set up, longs for pleasure and happiness and a life far from the shackles and constraints. Ammu resembles a free flying bird which wishes to fly in the open skies but to her disappointment her wings are torn apart by the thoughtless society wherein she is made to fall from her great heights of imagination.

Sudha Murthy is a renowned technocrat, philanthropist and a disciplined writer. In her work *Mahashweta* (2000), she depicts the inward voice and role of women in their husband's house. She concentrates on the pragmatic issues faced by women in the society and family relationship. She finds a resolution for such problems through her characters. Anupama, the protagonist of the novel is subjected to domestic violence and for her to survive in the male hegemonic society seems to be challenging and complicated. Sudha Murthy through the novel portrays the cruel treatment of the society towards Anupama, who unfortunately is affected by Leukoderma. Her mourning prolongs throughout her life when people begin to treat her like an untouchable. The novelist represents how a woman is subjected to cruelty by her family members and societies in the name of illness and disorder.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most important literary voices of the contemporary times. The novel *Palace of Illusions* (2008) is the story of affirmation of female force highlighting the grave relation established between womanhood and vengeance. Divakaruni, through the novel, showcases that the treatment of women by society in the ancient as well as in the modern times remain to be the same where the birth of girl children are not celebrated and welcomed as that of boy children. She supports the reason of women's privileges and rights in her own way, where she re-narrates the story of *Mahabharata* from a female perspective. The fiery representation of the character of Draupadi in the novel denotes her quest for identity.

Divakaruni not only brings out the grief, desire and the voice of Draupadi but also the feelings of millions of women of past and present who have been forced to the margins of culture. Without even giving enough chance to women it is very often concluded that women are unfit when compared to the men of the society.

Anita Desai is an eminent novelists and short story writer, who depicts the tormenting life of women in Indian society through her works. Her work of fictions *Cry the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965) and *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) deal with the mental and emotional conflict of women protagonists who are trapped between personal and societal self.

In the novel *Cry the Peacock*, Desai explains how a woman is pushed aside, ignored and isolated by the society when she disobeys the rules of the society. Through the protagonist Maya, the novelist shows the grave relationship between a husband and wife. Maya makes several attempts to make a physical and emotional bond with her husband Gautama in order to lead a happy life. But often she is neglected by him. Maya feels that she is abandoned and loses her own self by nurturing her husband throughout her life. The marital bonds that bind the two are very weak and breakable, the growing tension between them reaches its peak when Maya kills her husband and then commits suicide. Women like Maya in the Indian society are assigned with traditional roles where they struggle to lead or come out from the life dictated by the male hegemonic society. Women in order to come out from the tormenting life isolate and confine themselves to the four walls of the house.

Shashi Deshpande is a winner of Sahitya academy award and author of many novels. In all her narratives she states that the plight of women in the male hegemonic society is to search for their own identity. In the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), Deshpande portrays the protagonist Saritha's search for her individuality and her accusation for equality to her brother and afterward to her husband. Women like

Saritha have no identity of their own and go through mental conflicts in the process of establishing a new identity as strong self-dependent entity. The novelist highlights that the institution of marriage is a main illustration of the patriarchal system of the society to usher in female suppression. Women are made to live as the pleasure objects of their husbands. Like all other women, Saritha too feels as a trapped animal when she is sexually assaulted by her husband. She feels depressed and almost goes to a state of dejection. The novelist questions the strength of the institution of marriage which affects the life of all women making them extremely lifeless.

Bapsi Sidhwa, one of Pakistan's most famous writers of fiction in English, has gained a place in the world of literature. She belongs to India but loves to be addressed as Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsi woman. She is best known for her novel *Cracking India* (1991), which was previously published as *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988) and later made into a film, *Earth*, by a well-known director and filmmaker, Deepa Mehta. Her novels *The Crow Eaters* (1978), *The Pakistani Bride* (1983), *Cracking India (Ice-Candy-Man)*, *An American Brat* (1993) and *Water* (2006) — are about her insights of life as a Parsi, Punjabi, Pakistani, and as an American woman. She has the belief that all of her novels have certain level of autobiographical facets. She takes the important events from her life or from the lives of other people and writes those in her work in order to generate a finer reality of fiction. To Sidhwa every book is a discharge of pent up emotions that offers an emotional liberation and purification for the betterment of widow's life. Her novels grab the attention of the readers and critical minds across the literary map of the world and earned her the name and fame as one the most talented writers of South Asia, by including her in the list of great writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Khuswant Singh, R. K. Narayan and Kamala Markandaya.

In 1986 Sidhwa held a Bunting Fellowship at Radcliff, Harvard and in 1986 she had to her credit visiting scholarship at Rockefeller Foundation Centre, Bellagio, Italy. She received several awards such as Sitara-i-Imtiaz, in 1991 in Arts, which is the highest national honour in Pakistan and in 1994 she received Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writer's Award. Sidhwa has an interest in the social works related to destitute children and women and has assisted as a voluntary secretary in the destitute women's and children's home in Lahore. She has also played a role in the Advisory Committee to Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on Women's Development where she takes special interest in the movements for women's rights.

Sidhwa's attention is on women's sufferings. She projects issues against women in the patriarchal society. Her novels firmly and thoroughly analyze the general problems of women, their oppression and their wish to survive with self-respect in all her novels: *The Pakistani Bride*, *The Crow Eaters*, *Ice-Candy-Man*, *An American Brat* and *Water*. The novelist has passionately depicted the old and tattered thoughts of these women folk so as to achieve social concord in the passive means of survival in the male hegemonic society.

The novels talk about Pakistani society or the Indian subcontinent, but the issues deliberated are completely universal. Her works are written with a social purpose and in all of her novels, she disputes for the position of women in the society. The chief awareness of her work rests on the firm growth of women's vital feminine identity and the quest for selfhood. All her novels deal with the oppressive structures of customs, traditions and religion that victimize women.

Sidhwa's novels, though notably different from one another, discover women's discrimination in particular situations. The protagonists struggle with the system of their community. Among the prominent features of her novels appeared autobiographical elements and the perfect combination of fact and fiction. Two of her

novels, *The Crow Eaters* and *An American Brat* have discussed the Parsi culture with its difficulties on women. The other three novels have different stories which are related to women and their sufferings. *The Pakistani Bride* is based on a real story, *Ice-Candy-Man* which vividly shows the impact of a new affair, and *Water* narrate the brutalities of widowhood in the patriarchal society and all the three novels however revolve around the victimization of women.

Hindu religion preaches unconditional love especially for the needy, victimized and vulnerable but in implementation there is a lack in respect of the treatment of widows. Sidhwa traces the personal experiences of the lives of the widows and provides rare insights into the challenges and opportunities of the life for Indian women in contemporary India. She considers it as her duty to write as she thinks that writing is the best way to serve the women kind by attacking the vicious social customs and burning abominable atrocities against women. She begins to write with creativity and social consciousness to explore the secrets and bring out the truth of life. The basis of her literary voyage is due to her desire to explore her deplorable condition of women in all fields of life – social, economic, economic, political, cultural and moral, for people to examine with an integral view and suggest solutions to women problems.

Presenting the miseries of the female protagonists in the novels, Sidhwa dissents in anguish against the outdated social beliefs, religious fundamentalism and hegemonic male power and brings out the imperfections in the social system, unbearable customs, rituals, and habits meant for tormenting women and points out the absolute misunderstanding that prevails in the women's world. She believes that by exposing the dirt, murkiness and immorality in the society there would be an impact which will be supporting the women's liberty and their rights to equality.

Sidhwa opines that the vicious and poisonous serpent of tradition and custom – man ordained culture has struck the women with its fangs. Hence, the novelist brings to light the misdeeds of the men, the degeneration of the society and economic inequality with respect to that of women.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami, popularly known as Indira Goswami, is the winner of Jnanpith award (2001). She is awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for the book *The Rusted Sword* (1980) and The International Tulsi Award for her book, *Ramayana From Ganga To Brahmaputra* (1996) from Florida International University in 1999. She is revered with various awards like Bharat Nirman Award (1989), Sauhardya Award of Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan of Government of India (1992), Katha National Award for Literature (1996), Kamal Kumari Foundation National Award (1996), Padma Shri Award (2002) (which she denies receiving). Principal Prince Claus Award (2008), Krishnakanta Handique Award (2009) and Asom Sahitya Sabha Award (2009). She is honoured as the Ambassador for Peace by the Inter Religious and International Federation for World Peace.

Goswami has written originally in Assamese and many of her novels and short stories have been translated into various languages in India. Goswami is believed to be one of the most demonstrative Assamese writers and a celebrity who has contributed perceptively to the development and productivity of Indian literature. She is known as a thoughtful and sensitive writer who is feeble to tolerate the viciousness and unendurable conquest of human beings. Extreme suffering and agony left a deep effect on her inner self which led her to stand in support of the underprivileged and the oppressed.

To Goswami's credit, there are twenty-one books and seven novels. *The Blue-Necked Braja* or *The Blue-Necked God* (1976) is possibly the first novel written on the plight of Hindu widows commonly known as Radheshyamis in Vrindavan; *The*

Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker (1986) is viewed as a classic in Assamese literature. It is a novel about the struggle of Brahmin widows in Satras of Assam; *An Unfinished Autobiography* (1988) which is an autobiography of Goswami and it reveals her pathetic condition of life; *Pages Stained with Blood* (1994) is about the Sikh-riots of 1984 in Delhi; *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2005) is her most debated and revolutionary novel which is a dissent against the practice of animal sacrifice in the ancient Kamakhya Temple, in Guwahati, Assam.

Goswami shows an accurate picture of the society in all her novels where she reveals the truth and foolishness existing since ages. She does not blindly mention all the problems but tries hard to forcefully demand society to bring about transformations. Her attempts to break the social problems have brought an upheaval on the younger groups. She does not fright to speak against the social mistakes. Through her novels she defenses and exposes the problems of the subjugated classes, elicits the distorted figure of women, their position and misery in the society and amenably raises her voice against the problems like animal slaughter and other evils of society.

In some of the novels, Goswami describes a series of actions of man's brutality to his own kind with excellent ability. Her autobiography expresses the agitation, a sense of the pain and the restlessness that she endures in various stages of her life. Writing becomes her way of overcoming the sufferings. With untiring energy and continuous effort, she rises above the conditions that shape her, but never loses her deep sense of identification with those who sustain to grieve in the stream of pain. However, in most of her novels she connects the story with her own life. The writer is well-known not only because of her writings that deal with the snags of her own state, but she also exceeds the limitations and writes about the plight of widows regardless of the regional constraints.

Goswami also brings out the various social problems related to women like the status of women in the patriarchal society, the caste system and a woman's anguish as a widow. She presents the pathetic life of widowed women of the Satra, who are not permitted to go away from their houses; are supposed to cover or hide themselves as it is believed that their trace, vision or touch may bring problems or bad luck to others. Some traditional rites of widowhood which widows should adhere to are constant fasting, ensuing a stern eating regime like refraining from roasted food, and to live on uncooked food such as vegetables for days, resting and sleeping on the floor, bathing and experiencing rituals to purify their body.

Goswami who is herself widowed just after two and half years of her marriage, depicts the torments of a widow's life with sympathy. She lived in Vrindavan for two years and scrutinized carefully the wicked existence of the abandoned women and widows who crammed the pilgrim towns. The novelist studies the functioning and structuring of patriarchy and its influence on the lives of women, especially in the widow's life, because women in particular, are the most painfully deserted and wretched victims of the heartless society. Being a woman writer, she tries to reconstruct and re-writes the text of women's lives in a past setting with a female bias to provide a diverse view of social attitudes and institutions.

The novelists, Sidhwa and Goswami have seen the sufferings of widows in Vrindavan and thus have portrayed their plight and cruelties of Hinduism against them in their novels *Water* and *The Blue-Necked God* respectively. *Water* bravely outbreaks the dominating sanctimony of an aged tradition that has progressed over millions of years of socio-economic laws and now creates itself as religious belief. The main aim of the novel is to illustrate the mistreatment of women particularly the widows, who are pushed into prostitution by the male hegemonic society.

The novel explores the life of three widows Chuyia, Kalyani and Shakuntala, who are the victimizers of the male patriarchal society. It starts with the life of Chuyia, who is married to an old widower at the age of six. Her life becomes cursed, when she loses her husband shortly after her marriage. After his death, she is left alone by her parents and society and leads an austere life in widow's ashram along with other widows – Kalyani, Shakuntala, Bua and Madhumati.

Chuyia is forced to follow the pious life by praying and fasting the whole day. The ashram head, Madhumati exploits Kalyani's life by making her as a source to earn for their livelihood through prostitution. Meanwhile, she curses Kalyani when she comes to know of Kalyani's relationship with Narayan, a Gandhian idealist. As a prostitute, Kalyani who had been to Narayan's father, feels guilty and humiliated which leads her to commit suicide. To everyone's dismay, Chuyia becomes the second option after Kalyani's death. She is brutally hunted by lustful men. Shakuntala tries hard to save Chuyia from the hands of evil and decides to send her away from the town. Being a victim, Shakuntala desires to bring changes in the life of widows who are suppressed in the patriarchal male hegemonic society.

The Blue-Necked God highlights the plight of widows living in the sacred city Braj, who are left by their relatives and society to live an undignified life and die an even more undignified death. It is an autobiographical novel of Goswami which depicts the exploitation, plight and miserable lives of Saudamini, Sashiprova and Mrinalini. The protagonist, Saudamini realizes that widowhood is a perturbing existence where a woman is driven away from the cheerful life. She, during her widowhood longs for love and support, falls in love with a Christian youth and longs to marry him. She later feels that her remarriage with her lover may bring back her frustrating life of a widow and thus commits suicide considering it as a better option than marrying her Christian lover.

Widows in the novel are in a state of dejection, especially Sashiprova, who feels lonely and isolated in the crowded streets of Brindavan. In order to safeguard her chastity, she shares a room with a priest, Alamgarhi, a eunuch. After his death, she leads a thwarting life and wanders in the streets like an ugly ghost. With the help of Mrinalini, Sashiprova slowly overcomes the pain of loneliness.

Mrinalini, a forty-year-old unmarried woman loses all her hopes of marriage and children, manages a miserable life in a hovel along with old radheshyamis. Even before her marriage she endures the painful and bitter life like the widows, who bear a terrible life throughout their lifespan. She takes care of her insane mother and her blind and crippled father by obliterating her dreams and desires of life. Goswami through her women characters depict the wretched life of widows and women, who are subjugated in the patriarchal male hegemonic society.

In the select novels, *Water* and *The Blue-Necked God*, the state of living of widows in the patriarchal society reveals their horrifying life, cruelties met by them and their faded desires. Widows like Kalyani and Saudamini wish to continue the life of womanhood after they are widowed but the society makes them give up their life rather than accepting their decision. The novels have the effects of hegemony and assertiveness where widows are not allowed to take decisions and are treated harshly by the ruthless male hegemonic society.

The term hegemony is derived from the Greek 'hegemonia' which means 'ruler', 'leader' or 'state'. It speaks about the cultural dynamic by which a ruler professes and carries a leading position in social life. In other words, a culturally diverse society is ruled by the ruler or hegemon for the benefit of people and society. But hegemons dominate and manipulate people (women) and treat them as their subordinates. Thus, women in the male hegemonic society are ordered to lead their life in male-defined world.

Cultural hegemony means the domination of a culturally diverse society by the rulers who control and rule the culture of that society. With the dominant ideology, hegemony rule others by imposing a set of norms and practices in order to portray them as leaders of the state. In *Water* and *The Blue-Necked God*, the widows, Chuyia, Kalyani, Shakuntala, Saudamini and Sashiprova are dominated by the male hegemonic society and undergo pain, desolation, subjugation and torments in their lives. These widows are forced to live under the cultural norms set by the male patriarchal society which leads their life into a miserable path. Political, social and economic system gives advantages and power to males with which they treat women brutally.

Assertion theory on the other hand, is based on the principle that every individual has the privilege to treat one's own need as important, the right to express oneself as long as he/she do not violate the rights of others and to make mistakes unintentionally and not be punished for it. The widows in the select novels want their voices to be heard and valued but are ignored by the society and family members. In *Water*, Shakuntala fights for the freedom of widows from the cruelty of patriarchal society. Her assertiveness to enlighten the lives of widows by paving a new way in the life of Chuyia is considered not only as her victory but also as the victory of all widows.

The objective of the study is to elicit the in- depth study of the condition of women in the male-centric society, where women are treated as non-human beings and are demeaned by the society. Through the study, cultural hegemony and assertion act as key concepts to define the plights of women, especially widows in the rule-bound society. The focus in the research is to explore the challenges and difficulties of women as depicted in Sidhwa's *Water* and Goswami's *The Blue-Necked God*. While delving into Sidhwa's and Goswami's works, the research aids to comprehend

the supremacy of male hegemonic society both culturally and socially. The purpose of the study is to evoke an idea of gender equality in the readers' mind in order to empower women.

Reviews of some of the articles are as following. Fauzia Khan in an article "Plight of Widows in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novel *Water*" talks about the double standard of the Indian society where women are considered as animals. Through the article, she unveils how Sidhwa effectively frames the predicaments confronted by young widows' in stereotyped society. She also describes how women are socialised to take up widowhood rites and practices in the name of customs and beliefs.

Another article "Myth and Religion in Indira Goswami's *The Blue-Necked God*" by Thriveni M. L, shows the impediment of women in running their lives in patriarchal Indian society. To quote her words,

The so called shrewd and intellectual sect manipulates the emotions of the innocent and weak in the name of religion. They come with the stories which seem to be the verdict of God. Women are vulnerable to their hypocrisy and could be easily made victims. Hindu religion has laid down certain conditions to women and she is not supposed to cross that . . . if she dares she will be punished according to the social norms which are more pathetic and dangerous. Even the court laws are unable to protect them from the religious fangs. (235-236)

The novels *Water* and *The Blue-Necked God* explore the widow's life and their tragic journey. It aims to explore the problems of widows in the male hegemonic society and their assertiveness in order to overcome the dominating patriarchal set up. Chapter I, titled 'Introduction', deals with the development of the writings of 20th century women writers and their effort to depict the sufferings of women. The major patriarchal system of the society that tortures and disregards the feelings and emotions

of women are recorded. It gives a survey of various themes and works related to women and it also traces social issues like discrimination, disempowerment and male domination.

Women are victimized to many issues like dowry, child marriage, prostitution, widowhood and child abuse. The most significant cultural obstacle women face is the concept and practice of male hegemony which process and hides the injustices in the lives of women. It also depicts the assertiveness of women to protest against the male hegemonic society for gaining equal rights and importance. The research explores constant oppression faced by women, especially widows in the novels *Water* and *The Blue-Necked God* by Sidhwa and Goswami respectively and their effort to portray women as victims who are silent sufferers in the novels.

Chapter II, titled ‘The Unheard Voice of Widows’, deals with the pathetic life of widows in Sidhwa’s *Water*, who are forced to live a harsh and strict life in Rawalpur by society and family members. Chuyia, the protagonist’s life takes a transition from childhood to widowhood at very young age of eight. Novel tries to explore the exploitation of widows especially the child and the young widows like Chuyia and Kalyani, who are dragged into prostitution and are abused in the male-controlled society. Widows face lot of problems – the society demeans wherein widows have to adhere to the dictated terms and conditions by the society. Women’s effort to overcome the hardships of their life and their wish to fly freely in the sky are discovered through Shakuntala’s struggle to free Chuyia from the hands of men.

Chapter III, titled ‘The Agony of Widows’, deals with the pain of women and widows who in the name of religion are exploited by their family members and society in Goswami’s *The Blue-Necked God*. This chapter focuses mainly on Saudamini, the protagonist, who after widowhood longs for true love and care. The novel shows how religion and myth play a vital role in ruining her life. Widows’ fear

of survival and their effort to save themselves from the brutal exploitation of men are exemplified through the character Sashiprova, who lives with an impotent priest in order to keep herself safe and secure from lustful men. It also examines the distresses of an unmarried woman, Mrinalini, who wishes to enjoy married life but unfortunately, she endures pain and sufferings like the ill-fated widows throughout her life. Goswami depicts the deplorable image of widows in the holy cities like Vrindavan and other places where widows flock like bees in order to attain salvation but to their disappointment they left with no option but to face the dreadful life.

Chapter IV, titled 'Conclusion', deals with how men exert hegemony over women and how society treat women, inferior to men. It recommends society to respect women and to treat them equal to men. The authors try to convey that when a woman is happy the whole manhood will lead a satisfied life. Widows should be treated as normal human beings by releasing them from their caged existence and should be given a better space and privileges in family, society and nation. Society should welcome practices that would help women to widen their personal skills and generate opportunities without the confines set by firm gender roles, stereotypes and prejudices.

The existing study is to understand the cultural hegemony and assertion in the novels *Water* by Sidhwa and *The Blue-Necked God* by Goswami, where women characters are constrained to live in a bound society. Both Sidhwa and Goswami voice out their opinions on behalf of the silenced group, who are oppressed in the patriarchal society.

CHAPTER II

THE UNHEARD VOICE OF WIDOWS

Widowers marry again because it makes their lives easier. Widows often don't, because it makes their lives harder.

- Siri Hustvedt.

The novel *Water* is set during 1936 in the Bihar-Bengal border. Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel, talks about Hindu widows who reside at Rawalpur, which is a fictitious village. Widows irrespective of their social and economic background hail from various castes like Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Sudra and Tribals are sent or dumped into ashrams in Rawalpur by their family in order to spend the rest of their lives in the ashrams after they attain widowhood.

Sidhwa portrays widows of various communities and depicts the injustices that are faced by the women folks. Though the plot of the novel revolves around the era, where Gandhiji fights for the freedom of women and the emancipation of widows, the age-old traditions and customs are not fully broken down. Life, for many widows is a continuous battle. Religion, tradition, marriage, children, desires, illness, and death are everyday hassles for most individuals. Due to the prolonged oppression from their communities, widows find these traits of life difficult.

In the novel, a woman who attains widowhood is forced to go to Rawalpur where she lives in a small-dilapidated ashram in order to experience bad karma despite any variations in the age, status and beauty. This in turn affects them physically, mentally and psychologically. Though the society has to give highest degree of concern for the sufferings of women, they go blind eyes to the violence against women in the name of culture and custom. This is justified throughout the novel, *Water* with the help of various characters.

Sidhwa portrays the life of three widows in the novel: Chuyia, an eight-year old child widow, is not shown mercy and is forbidden by the society just like any other widow; Kalyani, a beautiful young widow is forced to take up prostitution; Shakuntala, as a widow is ill-treated by her family members as she was not able to attain motherhood.

Chuyia, the protagonist of the novel is the daughter of a poor Brahmin couple, Somnath (the priest) and Bhagya; and is the sister of Prasad and Mohan. She leads a cursed life right from her childhood in the patriarchal set-up where the birth of a son is valued more than that of a girl child and thereby her birth is not celebrated much by her family.

Sidhwa in most of her novels, advocate about the equality between daughter and son. Somnath and Bhagya consider their sons as the economic asset of the family, as sons do not migrate from families after marriage to another family like the daughters. They believe that their sons carry forward the pride of their family and are the sole protectors of the family. The priority given to the male child is quite evident when Bhagya tends to save extra portion of the food for her sons and takes great care of their health.

Bhagya's love, affection and attention have been bestowed on the male child that is stated in the novel as:

Bhagya was not given to looking at her daughter so closely. She often gazed upon her sons as they slept. She covertly observed them when they were absorbed in school work or having the extra portion of food she had saved for them, and then her heart brimmed over with love and the special pride that was her due as mother of sons. She fretted about them because they were pale, and their thin limbs and stalk-like necks

gave them an appearance of fragility. Bhagya never worried about her robust daughter and, scolding her for her playful and willful ways, plied her sturdy little body with work—fetch the water, carry the firewood, sweep the yard, feed the cow. (*Water* 16)

On the other hand, Chuyia is always piled up with domestic chores and she is less cared in the family while her brothers are sent to school for education.

Bhagya understands that she being a mother is partial to her sons and tries her level best not to treat Chuyia differently with the thought that Chuyia, actually belongs to her husband's house and thus in a parental home she must be treated as a guest. The overflow of Bhagya's love towards Chuyia is reflected as she says, "Flesh of my flesh, the beautiful fruit of my womb: her gaze lingered on her daughter's face" (17).

From the primeval times, it is being said that a female child has to help her mother and so Chuyia is made to perform all the household chores along with her mother in spite of her tender age. Sidhwa describes that,

Chuyia helped her mother pick up her brothers' soiled clothes for the wash and rolled up the bedding. She went to the back of the house to lay out the feed and fill the water bucket for the cow and its wobbly-legged calf. When she returned, she found her mother reclining by the window and chanting from the Mahabharata. Bhagya often did this before preparing her midday meal. Chuyia promptly covered her head with her sari and snuggled up to her mother, intent on listening to the passionate stories of the gods and goddesses. Bhagya arranged her sari to accommodate Chuyia and began to read out from the tattered copy of the Mahabharata. (18)

Chuyia is a lively child whose only fault is to have taken birth as a daughter to a Brahmin couple who are not financially well placed. She is deceived by her own parents, right from her young age. Conditions like poverty, illiteracy and ignorance stands as a root cause for marrying off their daughter at the age of six, so that they can avoid the dowry expenses. Thus, her father tries to marry her off to a forty-four-year-old wealthy widower, Hira Lal, father of few children. The marriage serves as a vent for sexual drive for Hira Lal, who seeks emotional release by exploiting a powerless small child, Chuyia who in turn is denied of her childhood and innocence. This demeans and dehumanizes her.

Bhagya is not in favour of Chuyia's marriage to such an old person chosen by Somnath and she objects the decision. It is mentioned in the text as: "She is only six' Bhagya said, her quavering voice so low Somnath had to strain to catch her words. 'I've heard Hira Lal is a grandfather.' 'He's younger than me, about forty-four. . .'" (13). Bhagya quarrels with Somnath as she thinks that Chuyia is of an age where she is immature to understand the concept of marriage.

Somnath shows his male power by shouting and staring at her. In the words of Sidhwa

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 to the blood . . . Bhagya, overwhelmed by her husband's fury, knew she had overstepped her bounds. She dropped her eyes. Her husband was right; his words bore the cumulative wisdom of gods and ancient sages . . . 'I am sorry,' she said humbly, duly chastened. (15)

Somnath proves his thoughtlessness and seems to be an opportunist by getting Chuyia married to an old man. Without realizing his mistake, he shouts at his wife stating: “You are the wife and daughter of Brahmin priests; surely you are aware of our traditions. . .” (15). He further adds that, “Outside of marriage the wife has no recognized existence in our tradition. A woman’s role in life is to get married and have sons. That is why she is created: to have sons! That is all!” (15). Somnath further states that “A girl is destined to leave her parents’ home early or she will bring disgrace to it. She is safe and happy only in her husband’s care” (14).

Somnath justifies his act as he quotes from the shastras:

“In the Brahmanical tradition,” said Somnath, shifting into the soothing and at the same time authoritative mode he adopted when speaking to his clients, “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 *soubhagyavati*, a fortunate woman.” And, as if recalling a passage from a holy book, he half-closed his lids to add, “A woman’s body is a site for conflict between a demonic *stri-svavahava*, which is her lustful aspect, and her *stri-dharma*, which is her womanly duty.” (14)

Although, Bhagya tries hard to persuade over her husband’s decision, Somnath is helpless as he has promised Hira Lal’s mother that he would get his daughter married to her son.

As Somnath is determined he convinces Bhagya by saying “A girl carried within her the seeds of dishonour, and the burden of responsibility was to be borne by her parents until she was married” (15). Since it is the duty of a wife to be faithful to her man and satisfy his demands, Bhagya is forced to give in. She holds no authority

to question him. At the same time, it is the responsibility of a husband to reprimand his wife who falls short of performing her wifely duties.

It is an unwritten rule of the patriarchal society that a woman should remain submissive to her husband without questioning his decisions and passively accept it, which is exactly what happens in the novel. As a result, Chuyia is married before she attains her puberty. Since it is a custom that a pre-pubescent girl has to live in her parental home, Chuyia continues to live in her parent's house even after the marriage. Thus, Chuyia suffers patriarchal hegemony and harassment on the grounds of marriage at a young age.

After two years of marriage, Hira Lal succumbs to the deadly typhoid. Chuyia hardly remembers being married. However, as per tradition she is forced to accompany the dead body of her husband to Rawalpur where he is to be cremated. Hence, even though Chuyia is a small child and the age difference between her and her husband is vast, she has to embrace widowhood right from her childhood.

Years away from a proper understanding of the ways of the world, Chuyia is told that she no longer exists as a person – all because of the sudden demise of her better-half. According to Brahmin culture in those times,

. . . 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. A woman's sexuality and fertility, which was so valuable to her husband in his lifetime, was converted upon his death into a potential danger to the morality of the community. (32)

According to the ancient law, for a woman, her husband is equivalent to god, and when he dies, the wife is expected to manifest inconsolable grief for the rest of her life. People wish their marriage to continue for a long period of time and so widowhood is not welcomed as it marks a transition in the life of a woman from being married to the widowed state. After the loss of her husband, the woman has to lead her life from thereon. Her identity is reduced to nothingness. She is not only made to put an end to her married status, but her status also marks the loss of her pride, privilege, prestige and independence in the society and with no exception in her own family too. Hence, widowhood is a nightmare for all women.

Regardless of her age, Chuyia is confined to the corner of the house where she leads a life of isolation after her husband's death. In Brahmin and Hindu culture, women regard widowhood as a punishment for sins committed by them in their previous birth, such as disobedience or disloyalty to the husband. Dr. Godavari D. Patil in the book *Hindu Widows: A Study in Deprivation* quotes the words of Mahatma Gandhi who rightly remarked:

Enforce widowhood upon little girls is a brutal crime for which we Hindus are daily praying. Widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable yoke and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion, whereas voluntary widowhood consciously adopted by a woman who has felt affection of a partner adds grace and dignity of life, sanctifies the house and uplifts religion itself. (28)

Life of widowhood is a penalty she pays for getting married at a young age. The death of the husband creates a deep void in the life of the small child. Chuyia now becomes a servant of god on the romance-drenched streets of Rawalpur, which for her is a philosophical challenge. The death of a husband is seen as altering the

social identity of a woman and in this case, even the small child is not spared. When Hira Lal dies, Chuyia is considered as scum in the society where she is refused any kind of support by her family or to the greater extent by the society. Dr. Godavari D. Patil in the book *Hindu Widows: A Study in Deprivation* quotes the words of Eshleman, who points out that “society makes adjustment to widowhood status difficult by placing a taboo on the discussion of death between husband and wife, or parent and children” (32).

The system of marriage in the age-old patriarchal society, contributes to a large number of child widows like Chuyia, who are condemned to a life of forced austerity in the memory of their husbands. There are certain rules laid out by the society that, a woman after becoming a widow is supposed to wear white saris and should get rid of their womanly identities of a married woman.

After the cremation of Hira Lal at the Ghats in Rawalpur, Chuyia is denied of all the marriage markers like, vermilion, bindi, bangles, mangal-sutra and any kind of embellishment. As per the traditional demands, Chuyia is expected to clothe herself in a plain white cotton sari without even a blouse and live on a meal per day. Sidhwa narrates the change of attitude in people by writing that,

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. (41)

For Chuyia, "The mechanizations of the adult world were a mystery . . ." (157).

Chuyia is put on show before the people who attend her husband's cremation. Breaking of the mangal-sutra and tonsuring the head has as little meaning for her as did the haldi-uptan ritual of her marriage. Sidhwa writes,

Having lost all control over what was happening to her, Chuyia sat on the steps stoical and resigned. . . The barber cut her hair in stages. . . . Black hair littered Chuyia's bare shoulder and her white sari. She kept her eyes tightly shut. Her fingers involuntarily tore at her sari as the barber held her firmly by the shoulder with one hand and ran his snipping scissors all over her scalp. Somnath came and sat on the stone step below Chuyia. . . . 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. It was enforced by the belief that if the widow did not shave her head, every drop of water that fell upon the hair polluted the husband's soul as many times as the number of hairs upon her head. . . . As the razor scraped across her scalp, Chuyia's teeth were set on edge. Somanath noticed her toes curl, almost reflexively, in mute protest. (43-44)

Later, after being attired like a widow and tonsured, she is described as a “. . . newly-minted widow out like a doll. . . ” (42).

Chuyia’s marriage rituals and widowhood rituals mark contrast between marriage and widowhood, depicting the two sides of the coin. During her marriage ceremony, standing next to Hira Lal, Chuyia looks like a ‘diminutive doll’ celebrating the numerous wedding rituals and enjoying the enticing offer of new clothes. But in the ritual of her widowhood she is looked upon as an ‘inanimate object’. Sidhwa demonstrates the figures of women, whether in wedding or in widowhood, to be nothing more than inactive and mute objects that are fooled around with and deployed either by men or by the patriarchal culture.

When a small girl like Chuyia is married before her puberty, the society that does not allow her to live with her husband, forces her to take up the life of widowhood after her husband’s death. During Hira Lal’s death ceremony:

One of the hired women attending their party led Chuyia through an arch in the wall and into a damp little room. Before Chuyia could protest, woman pulled down her skirt and pulled her blouse up over her neck and, saying, “You can’t wear colours or stitched clothes. . . . You are a young one, aren’t you. . . . “No blouse. I told you widows are not permitted to wear stitched cloth.” (41-42)

Along with the practice of shaving their heads, widows have to eat *sattvic* food, so that they are not subjected to sexual arousal. They also have to keep themselves away from all auspicious things and they are forced to denude their body in order to be seen as less attractive. It is described in the novel as:

According to the Manusmriti, the foremost Sanskrit text in the orthodox tradition, a widow’s head is shaved, her ornaments removed,

and she is expected to remain in perpetual mourning. She is to observe fasts, give up eating “hot” foods in order to cool her sexual energy, avoid auspicious occasions because she is considered inauspicious (for having caused husband’s death), and to remain celibate, devout and loyal to her husband’s memory. (171)

Thus, widows transform themselves as neuter beings.

The sufferings of the widows and their shattered emotions due to the customs and practices in the society are expressed by Sidhwa as: “She remembered the time-honoured words known by all Hindu women, exhorting that the sight of the widow itself was something inauspicious, so inauspicious that if sighted at the beginning of an auspicious venture, the venture itself has to be postponed” (143).

According to the Hindu tradition, a woman is recognized as a person only when she is with her husband. A wife has no recognized existence and ceases to exist without her husband. The man is considered to be the head of the family, owner of all the assets and the sole decision maker of the family. In the contrary, a woman is always dependent on her husband for support, decision making and protection. Hence a widow is sent into a demoralizing economic tail-spin due to the poverty that follows the loss of the breadwinner.

As widows know nothing of handling financial affairs, they are easily exploited by men. Therefore, widowhood is a crisis in a woman’s life, and it represents commencement of new set of relationships and expectations. It involves new social adjustments for the family as well as for her. It is an event that constitutes the greatest and the saddest change in the life of a woman. It also leads to the loss of status resulting in a state of loneliness, helplessness and hopelessness. As a child, Chuyia undergoes such difficulties and has to cope with a transition when she has to

adjust to the new status because of the social norms and taboos that put her in most disadvantaged positions as well as restrict her from social interactions.

Sadananda patiently replies that the *Stri-dharma* of the Hindu tradition states that, “. . . 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” (184). His reply is quite evident that remarriage of widows is left to the approval of the family due to their interest in taking control over the widow’s property borne out of marriage.

In Rawalpur women consider widowhood as a great curse. Chuyia and other widows lose their privileges and rights in the family and society and in most of the social and cultural rituals. They are stigmatized as women who have failed to safeguard their husband’s lives. No widow will choose to live far from their homes and spend their life in the place like Rawalpur. The sufferings of Chuyia and other widows not only show the torture undergone by women but also the decline of human values among people.

Widows are expected to live the life of ascetics, spend their time in constant devotion to God, a total separation from worldly affairs and pleasures during their widowhood in widows’ ashrams. The sole purpose of the life of widows is to devote their life to God, to find salvation and peace that will help them move closer to God. Unfortunately, the ashrams do not keep up to the expectation of the widows since they do not protect them from the locals who treat them roughly. Thus, the widows who reside at the ashrams are exploited by the men of the society.

Chuyia, despite her age is not spared. There are a number of innocent girls like Chuyia who are forced to endure the pain of widowhood till their death in the name of customs and conventions imposed on them by the dominant society. Chuyia’s father

stands helpless to the harsh reality of sending his daughter as a widow to the widow colony – the vidhwa ashram. This marks the beginning of her miserable life, “With her white sari and bald, yellow head, Chuyia was a very different child from the girl who had ridden in the bullock-cart” (55).

Chuyia’s father tells her that “You are a widow now” (40), she in turns asks him “For how long, Baba. . .” (40), revealing the fact that the girl is too young to understand what widowhood is. Eight-year-old Chuyia is supposed to lead the life of a child, where she can enjoy the taste of childhood by playing with her friends in streets, but the society makes her life miserable by forcing her into widowhood which goes into an extent of restricting her to even walk freely in the streets. She is confronted with a new set of expectations after widowhood. Thus, along with other widows, she too is expected to spend her time inside the ashram, praying or fasting. Independence and identity are meant only for men.

Chuyia tries to adapt herself to the new life as a widow in the ashram and faces various new characters where each one is characterized by her own primal state of mind. Chuyia though young, overcomes her sense of dislocation, makes friends with other women in the ashram. She does not feel detached when she is with widows like Kalyani, Shakuntala and Bua.

Chuyia is more attached to Kalyani and Shakuntala than with anyone else. Their presence enriches her new life from the beginning through their demonstration of care and bonding. Even in their forced isolation from the world, they seek companionship and build-up collective strength to make their lives more meaningful. Shakuntala repeatedly says, “You must do *japa*. Chant *Jai Shree Krishna* 108 times a day, and soon you’ll fly away home . . .” (65). The role of Shakuntala and Kalyani

depict a deep-rooted patriarchal conditioning which makes them more obedient and are bound to widowhood.

Kalyani encourages Chuyia to never lose hope and she narrates the story of Dushyanta who lives a life of solitude in the forest in order to develop the courage and bravery required to live in the ashram. The care and affection shown by the motherly figure Shakuntala is enjoyed by Chuyia and Kalyani during their stay in the ashram. At the same time the entry of Chuyia brings a change in the lives of Shakuntala and Kalyani, which makes them to interact better to the rigidly imposed ashram system.

Kalyani's situation is similar to that of Chuyia in many ways. Kalyani loses her mother even before her first birthday. She is known for her beauty and is married to a highest bidder, a man of sixty, when the girl is merely six years old, later to become a widow at such a young age. The spousal loss causes a drastic role change in Kalyani's life too. The social consequences brought about by widowhood have a damaging effect on the self-concept of Kalyani.

Chuyia and Kalyani are subjected to total segregation. The reason behind this segregation and restriction is to prevent any kind of intimacy of women with men during widowhood. They have to live a life of unseen existence. Their emotions remain bottled up. Widowhood is considered much more sorrowful than even the death of a loved daughter, for the misery over the loss of a daughter can be overcome, but widowhood dogs a woman till her own death. It is a life time event that not only removes all relationships but also reduces the size of informal support network.

On the other hand, Shakuntala, the literate middle-aged woman and a very devoted Hindu, is a woman who turns as a widow at the age of thirty. She is married to a young widower. Her mother-in-law is tolerant towards her as she believed that her daughter-in-law would bear a boy child who will be an heir to the family. Fate

plays a vital role in Shakuntala's life in snatching the role of a wife and a mother from her forever. When her husband dies, she is shunned by her mother-in-law and is viewed as a woman not only responsible for her husband's death but also as a threat to the family.

Sidhwa represents the discrimination against widows in the domestic level portraying how families treat a widow within their own households. They are considered only as a disgrace to the family's pride-

She was not only viewed as responsible for her husband's death, but also as a threat to her husband's family and, most of all, to that of her dead husband's family and, most of all, to that of her dead husband's spirit, simply because of her vital womanhood and potential sexuality. She felt all eyes were constantly watching her, waiting for her to commit some sin that would bring curses on them and consign her husband to hell. (176)

Nobody understands Shakuntala's grief at the loss of her husband's death:

At first, Shakuntala had thought she might die from grief and did not know how she would live without the love and protection of her husband. Her grief was compounded by her ill treatment at the hands of her in-laws. She had gone from being adored to being reviled, looked upon as something filthy. . . She could still see the fury in her mother-in-law's eyes as she broke the glass bangles and ripped off the *mangal- sutra* from her neck in the first rites marking her passage into widowhood. . . she was essentially slowly starved, as she was limited to one meal a day—and a meagre one of unseasoned rice and *daal* at that—to cleanse her body of lust. She had to sleep on the

ground. Her only useful role, that of wife and producer of sons, was gone forever. (175-176)

Unable to withstand the ill-treatment of her mother-in-law, she joins the ashram. She enters the widows' ashram after being marginalized and cruelly accused by the family.

Shakuntala is an ardent follower of Hindu customs who tries to achieve spiritual liberation. She is well versed in writing and reading skills and has a great knowledge of the sacred texts and scriptures which make her to think, "There must be a reason for it. Why are we sent here. . ." (209). Like the foster girl of Sage Kanva, Shakuntala, too suffers for the honest duty rendered and she strongly hopes that she will find her love of life again.

Shakuntala has great respect for the priest Sadananda, who gives the right kind of support in discerning true faith from blind superstition and her loyal adherence to Hindu orthodox laws gradually widens to the extent that she is capable of breaking the shell of the ideal upper caste Hindu widow, and becomes the agency for alternative scenarios beyond the regime of the Widows' House. The admiration that Shakuntala has for Sadananda gives a new meaning to her life. Sadananda consoles Shakuntala by saying "We ignore the laws that don't suit us" (185).

In Sadananda's early ages, he was a lustful man who used his authority of being a priest to take advantage of the beautiful young widows. Sidhwa portrays the character of Sadananda as,

When he had first assumed his duties as a young priest, he had been overwhelmed 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 after

the young, the middle-aged and, except for the very old, even the elderly. The widows' saris covered only one shoulder and the hollow in their collarbones made him want to bury his face in their necks. The combination of moral turpitude and innocence with the voluptuous joggle of flesh under the saris gave an unsustainably erotic charge. And the eroticism was heightened by their vulnerability and availability. He had succumbed and occasionally taken advantage of the access his possession 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? (95)

Later when Sadananda becomes old, he is transformed into a man of spirituality. Shakuntala's heart, which gets ruptured by the ill-treatments of the society, wonders about the meaning of life and engages with the following conversation with the priest Sadananda:

“Is something troubling you?” he asked, masking the desire in his voice and shading his eyes, as if from the glare, with his hand. Shakuntala sat down on the floor at his feet and, overcoming her hesitation and speaking gravely as was her wont, said, “Panditji, I have read the Holy Books without questioning them. But you have studied all the Holy Scriptures . . . I have great respect for your learning . . . Panditji, is it written that widows should be treated badly? Shakuntala was not given to saying much to him, and he was surprised by her loquacity and the almost provoking way she had phrased her question. (184)

Shakuntala's conversation with Sadananda brings an enlightening revelation in

her search for meaning in the age-old traditions. He tells Shakuntala that a new rule has been passed by the government for widow's remarriage. This later helps Shakuntala in accepting Kalyani's decision to marry Narayan.

Bua, a notable character is from the family of land owners, turns as a widow at the age of thirty-five and is thrown out of the house after her husband's demise. After she joins the ashram, she starts to sing bhajans in return for a cup of rice to keep her alive. Bua's childhood life is similar to that of Chuyia's.

The only memory that Bua has had about her marriage life is that of eating sweets on the auspicious ceremony. She describes to Chuyia with ecstasy, the memory of eating sweets and says that, "Plump white *rasgullas*, piping hot *gulab jamuns*. The saliva drools in my mouth even now when I think of it! Yellow *laddoos*, fragrant with saffron, dripping with pure butter. Cashew-nut fudge covered with gold leaf . . .' Bua trailed off in ecstasy" (68). Chuyia fulfils Bua's last wishes of getting her the laddoos that she craves for all her life in the ashram after which she breathes her last. In spite of being a small child, Chuyia understands Bua's desires which the society despite its age and experiences fail to understand and fulfil.

Chuyia's relationship with Shakuntala, Kalyani and Bua make her feel comfortable in the ashram where as it is different with Madhumati. Chuyia does not like Madhumati, the weird woman who rules the dilapidated ashram. Madhumati is the rule-maker of the ashram and she is seen as tyrannical by the others, for a woman who is fully aware of the injustices meted out to widows and their plight, however, exerting her domination over them.

On seeing a child widow like Chuyia in the ashram, Madhumati says, "Our Holy Books Say, 'A wife is part of her husband while he's alive.' Right?" (52). She

also tells Chuyia, “In our shared grief, we’re all sisters here, and this *ashram* is our only refuge” (52). The widows fervently agreed by nodding their heads,

“And when our husbands die, God help us, the wives also half die.”

She paused for effect and sighed dramatically. “So, how can a poor half-dead woman feel any pain?” she asked, not really expecting any answer. Chuyia, tears still slipping down her face, raised her head, and between snuffles, replied with a child’s innocent logic, “Because she’s half alive?” (52-53)

The widows do not think twice before accepting whatever Madhumati says because if they go against her wishes they would be sent out of the ashram. Hence, Chuyia too is forced to live among other widows under the tyrannical rule of Madhumati, whom she detests.

Madhumati entered the ashram forty years ago with the help of Gulabi, who saves her from two men who rape her. Though she hails from a rich family, she too has to live in ashram after becoming a widow. Her condition in the ashram is not as same as her early life. She says that “When the family forced him to get me married, he gave me a dowry like I was a king’s daughter! Where is the king’s daughter now? In this dung-heap!” (84). However, she exploits the other widows in the name of religion and custom. Now as a fifty-year-old widow, she rules the ashram. She is a woman who shows more concern and affection to her pet parrot Mitthu than the widows under her custody.

Ashram is a form of spiritual commune where these widowed women are housed in return for doing chores such as cooking and cleaning. During the festival times, the pilgrims and the temple-goers donate money and food as charity to the

widows and they are given a cup of rice and fistful of lentils for singing bhajans for eight hours continuously at the temples. This is the only means of sustenance.

Due to helpless conditions, Chuyia and other widows are dependent on the generosity of people who visit temples and on charity. Their plight is heightened when they do not receive any economic support from their parents or husband's family. Sidhwa rightly quotes in the novel as, "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" (209).

The widows in these ashrams believe that singing bhajans to God is a way of living for them. Chuyia comes to know that she lives in singing ashram:

Some days later, Chuyia learned that she was living in a singing *ashram*-temple. The widows sang Lord Krishna's and Radha's names to bless their benefactors and grant the requests of supplicants to cure a sick person, or get a job, or to benefit their business. They paid the temple priests, and the widows were given a cup of rice and 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. (60)

The rigid social norms do not allow widows to work in any household or business establishment. The traditional society wants them to remain isolated being dumped in ashrams without any ray of hope in their lives. The life of widows inside the ashram will not be known to the outer world, as they are confined to certain rules in the name of traditional practices which is mentioned as,

What happened in it was nobody's business but the *ashram*'s. Provided it adhered to its ordained rules and role, no one could interfere with its

traditional governance and its sacrosanct place in society. Anyone who tried to defy the status quo would have to face the combined wrath of the religious and civil bastions of the city. (180)

Chuyia is not habituated to the society which is confined to age-old restrictions. Chuyia stirs a few questions with directness in situations where others simply follow the ancient texts. She raises questions like “*Didi*, where is the house for the men widows?” (97), to which the other widows throw shouts of outrage saying, “God protect our men from such a fate!” (98).

Chuyia inevitably effects change in the lives of Shakuntala and Kalyani, who try to conquer their inherent doubts regarding the scriptures associated with life. They are blindly following the rigid rules imposed on them in the ashram. She observes that there are no widowers and starts to question as to why only the women had to spend their lives in renunciation. She turns daring enough to bite and scream by saying “I don’t want to be a stupid widow! Fatty!” (53).

Widowhood brings about a variety of social problems like adult and child dependency, poverty, unemployment, illness and family disorganization and women’s insecure status. It should be considered as a serious problem and widows must be treated with respect. Women are forced into prostitution either by their parents, husbands or relatives – as a result of the difficult economic and social conditions in which they find themselves.

Widows are often found to be illegally confined to brothels in slavery like conditions where they are physically abused. Once they are caught up in the system there is practically no way out, and they find themselves in a very vulnerable situation. Since prostitution is illegal, women find it difficult to come forward and ask for protection if they want to escape from it, but prostitution is a source of livelihood

in the case of widows. Tormenting a widow is shame to the society. For the need of wicked men, widows have to undergo sorrow and humiliation by selling their body. It is seen to be a moral leprosy or social disease endorsed by men who lack morality.

The ashram ruler, Madhumati arranges for prostitution as a business to support the widow's colony financially with the help of her eunuch, Gulabi. A primary form of survival of widows in Rawalpur is prostitution, where the young widows are forced into prostitution and are guided to the place of the customers by pimps. Their poverty forces them to take up prostitution. The novelist depicts the cruel nature of the heads of the ashrams who use their power to force young widows into prostitution in order to earn themselves 'extra' money.

Madhumati plans to force Kalyani into prostitution for which Kalyani is allowed to grow her hair against the usual customary practice of widows shaving their heads. When Chuyia sees Kalyani, she wonders why her head is not tonsured and looks like an angel. At a point of time, Chuyia feels that she too must possess thick and long hair like Kalyani and so asks, "Will Madhu-*didi* let me grow my hair if I ask her?" (157), Chuyia does not understand the reality behind Kalyani's long hair. A woman looks beautiful only if she possesses long hair and Madhumati insists Kalyani not to cut her hair because she can please her customers only by her looks which will eventually get her more income for the ashram.

Sexual harassment of widows is a growing concern for women. Men abuse their authorities to seek sexual favours from widow co-workers or subordinates, sometimes promising promotions or other forms of career advancement or simply creating an untenable and hostile work environment. Women who refuse to give into such unwanted sexual advances often run the risk of demotion to dismissal.

Madhumati who forces Kalyani to take up prostitution tells her that, “You must take care of yourself. . . .You are the jewel of this house. . . . If you are happy, our clients are happy. And when they’re happy, I am happy!” (152). Kalyani cannot accept the words of Madhumati and in anger she replies her saying that, “This is an *ashram*, *didi*, not a brothel. . .” (152).

Kalyani is forced into selling her body as she is the source of income. She is pressurized by the ashram into receiving rich customers in lieu of a heavy sum. To quote the words of Sidhwa, “Kalyani kept quiet. Madhumati had been only too delighted to take in such a young beauty and had immediately made arrangements to sell her services. She fetched an unheard-of price, for in addition to her rare beauty, she had been a virgin-widow. Kalyani had been nine at the time” (157).

Widows are used as mere sexual objects in the patriarchal society. They not only get mental humiliation but also face domestic violence in the name of forced prostitution. It is indirectly exemplified by Sidhwa in the following conversation between Narayan, the idealist and his friend Rabindra, at the sight of Kalyani in the Ganga Ghat[river platform]:

A lone light glided slowly down the river. As the small boat, which was the source of both the bobbing light and the song, drew closer, Rabindra said, “There she goes.” Narayan, nearing the dénouement of the *raag*, ceased playing. “There goes who?” he asked, dreamily, still in the emotional grip of the melody. The friends conversed in English. “A whore,” answered Rabindra nonchalantly. “My father is one of her clients.” Narayan, intrigued, sat up in an attempt to get a closer look at the boat and its occupants. All he could see was the smudge of a white shape against the dark night, and that too was disappearing “Does she

look like a whore? She's a widow, you fool," said Narayan, irritated. "I know she's a widow," replied Rabindra. "The gentry here have an 'unnatural concern' for widows." (88-89)

Kalyani's enforced prostitution is well enjoyed by a wealthy landowner, a zamindar names Seth Dwarkanath, who secretly used her for his pleasure but hypocritically calls her a whore when he finds that his son, Narayan is in love with her. In the Indian society, male hegemony considers widows as the faceless, voiceless and nameless objects of pleasure to be played and used with whenever and however the heart desires for the lust and merely to be leftover or thrown without hesitation when they outlast their desire.

Kalyani encounters a relationship with the idealist Narayan, who is nobler than his father. He is noble, which is quite unlike his father who is lustful. He is motivated by Gandhian ideals and wishes to emancipate Kalyani from her widowhood in order to lead a happy life as his wife. After meeting Narayan, Kalyani feels that her life is full of hopes and pleasures. It is a perfect match as their love is pure and both their names have spiritual connotations. The other name of Kalyani is goddess of abundance, Lakshmi; Narayan is the other name of lord Vishnu.

According to Hindu scriptures marrying a widow is considered to be a sin and when Narayan expresses his view of marrying Kalyani to his mother, Bhagwati, she reluctantly shouts at him saying, "*Hai* Bhagwan! You're serious! How will we show our face to the world? . . . Gandhi has turned you into a lunatic! Marry a widow? How can you even think of it? It's a sin! You should know that!" (162). Narayan on the contrary replies her: "It is not as terrible as you think, Ma—old ways and ideas have changed. Raja Ramohan Roy says widows should get remarried" (162). He desires to make reformation by liberating widows like Kalyani from the socio-religious miseries

by following the Gandhi's ideology. Bhagwati with disgust and anger replies, "And Raja whoever—what does he know about our traditions. . ." (162).

Narayan's with good intention decides to marry Kalyani, as he feels that widows are the bearers of the age-old Indian tradition, culture, and identity; but to his disappointment he fails not only to bring any radical change in Kalyani's life but also fails to challenge radically his father's sexual domination of widows.

Kalyani finds it difficult to live as a passive victim of the societal hegemony and makes a bold attempt to move out of the ashram with the help of Shakuntala to join hands with Narayan a way of redemption from an abusive life. Later, Kalyani ends the relationship with Narayan when she realizes that she used to visit Narayan's father as a prostitute. To her disappointment everything goes topsy-turvy and knows that "cast out in the streets she would die, but to live without Narayan and return to a life of forced prostitution would be a worse kind of death" (205).

When she makes a final attempt to re-join the ashram, she is cruelly mistreated by Madhumati, who does not show her the slightest affection and says, "The Mahabharata says, 'Just as birds flock to a piece of flesh left on the ground, so all men try to seduce a widow.' Let's see how she gets married now! Shameless whore! If the child hadn't spoken, we'd all be contaminated by lustful sin" (177-178). Kalyani becomes aware that "Nothing had changed. And yet everything had" (204-205).

When Madhumati comes to know about Kalyani's love for Narayan and in a furious state, she tonsures Kalyani's head which makes her look ugly:

Before Kalyani knew what was happening, Madhumati grabbed her by her hair, and dragged her to the *barsati*, the storeroom next to Kalyani's room. Withdrawing from her sari a pair of scissors, she sawed off a hank of hair in a surprisingly swift movement. Kalyani

sank to her knees in shock, too numb to resist. Madhumati proceeded to hack off the rest of her hair until Kalyani was left with only sparse tufts. Kalyani sat immobilized, like a fledgling bird fallen from its nest. (170)

Kalyani unable bear the torture makes a decision not to subjugate herself to a life of exploitation. With the heart full of sorrow, she marches towards her death.

Widows like Kalyani are always desperately in search of love and acceptance wherever they go but their fate remains the same where they take their own lives in frustration. Thus, when Kalyani's love for Narayan befalls tragedy. She is seen as a threat to the society as well as to the widow colony. She commits suicide in order to rebuff any further exploitation. For her, suicide becomes a desirable and honourable option, which she lucidly embraces:

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. (205)

Kalyani chooses to transgress against the sexual dominating society instead of submitting herself to the patriarchal sexual oppression she throws herself in the holy Ganges. Shakuntala grieves for the death of Kalyani and wonders about “. . . the

meaning of Kalyani's life, at the unfairness that had stamped its short span—at the promise of happiness as that had fallen into her lap like a ripe fruit she could never partake of' (210).

Elders usually pamper children whereas in the case of Chuyia, Madhumati often yells at Chuyia without a proper reason. She is treated inhumanly by Madhumati till the death of Kalyani. After which Madhumati pretends to pamper Chuyia in order to lure her and throw her into the hands of lustful men who later exploit her for their sexual desires. After the death of Kalyani, Chuyia is the chosen substitute by Madhumati. Madhumati, though is a victim of forced prostitution does not have any regret for enforcing Kalyani and Chuyia into the same without their consent. Women play a vital role in marginalization and victimization of a woman.

Chuyia becomes the second choice of income generating source to the ashram after Kalyani. Madhumati sends Chuyia with Gulabi to Seth Bhupindernath's mansion. Chuyia is drugged and exploited by Seth Bhupindernath. Kalyani's suicide and the innocent Chuyia's rape are events that express how purity of women is polluted and exploited.

Shakuntala becomes restless when she hears how Madhumati for the sake of money forces Chuyia into. Even with the support of people, it is difficult to achieve the desired. In such a situation, being left alone to fend for oneself is another matter of concern. Caught in this dilemma, without knowing what to do next, Shakuntala lashes out on Madhumati angrily for sending Chuyia as a prostitute. This is sensitively exhibited by Sidhwa as: "Where did you send her? Where did you send her? OPEN YOUR EYES! WHERE DID YOU SEND HER!" she shrieked . . . Shakuntala slapped Madhumati hard across the face. The old woman's head shook from the force of the blow. . ." (216).

Shakuntala, being a barren woman, feels a surge of motherliness in her while seeing Chuyia and treats her like her own child gifted to her by the gods. Whatever happens to her she wants to protect Chuyia, henceforth making her life worth living. Like a bird that loses its way and is confused, Shakuntala too is confused regarding how to save the little girl from the hands of evil. In the words of Sidhwa,

Shakuntala grew rigid with fear and fury. Chuyia had been drugged. What had the beast done to a drugged child? Shakuntala struggled to pick up the inert body and, with great difficulty, hauled Chuyia onto the embankment. For a long while, she sat on the *ghat* steps, holding Chuyia close to her heart and rocking her gently. She drifted in and out of sleep with child in her arms. . . Shakuntala sat on the steps, cradling Chuyia in her arms. Chuyia's pallor was frightening, and she appeared to be gravely ill. Shakuntala did not know what to do. Whom could she turn to for help? (218)

Shakuntala has a determined vision for Chuyia that she unlike Kalyani should have a better future. She wishes that before her last breath she should see Chuyia living a better life. Shankuntala believes that the only way to rescue Chuyia from the abuses that she will be subjected to if left alone in the ashram, is to send her away from Rawalpur.

Like a mother bird, which protects her little ones from eagles, Shakuntala holds Chuyia in her arms till she hands her in the protection of Gandhian idealist, Narayan. Shakuntala

With a monumental effort, Shakuntala held the child aloft as she ran with the train, trying desperately to hand Chuyia over to any of Gandhi's followers who would reach out a hand. "Brothers please take

her. Please take this child with you,” she begged the *khaddar*-clad young people looking out the windows, standing at the open doors. “Listen to me . . . Why don’t you listen? Why don’t you understand? Sisters! Please take her with you! *Please* listen! This child is a widow.” . . . The straining engine began to gather speed, and Shakuntala ran alongside faster. She was afraid she would stumble; her voice was becoming hoarse. Just then, a hand reached out from the train toward her and Chuyia. Shakuntala looked up to see Narayan leaning precariously from the train, holding on with one hand, extending the other to grasp Chuyia. “*Didi!*” he shouted. (227-228)

To safeguard Chuyia from prostitution, Shakuntala sends the child with Narayan with the hope that he will take care of the child. She believes that, under his protection Chuyia will fly freely and enjoy her childhood as well as womanhood. It is stated in the novel as:

Gandhi’s followers were kind and compassionate like him. They were filled with new ideas, new ways of viewing the world like Narayan was. They would not hold a child’s widowed state or her past against her. They could take her away from Rawalpur and the *ashram* and give her a new start in life. (226)

Shakuntala misses Chuyia but at the same time, she finds contentment by saving Chuyia from the brutal society.

Gandhi was a great man who wanted to uplift the deplorable saddened condition of Indian women especially widows and their status; showed them way to get rid of their tyrannical customs and wanted them to play an important role in political, social and economic life of India.

Like Gandhi, Sidhwa too wanted reformation in the society where the fate of widows is expected to change by liberating them from the hardships of widowhood. Gandhi wanted the society to celebrate the birth of a female child and insisted the family members to avoid the distinction between a son and a daughter. He also competed against the custom of dowry since parents suffer in order to settle their daughters that lead to child marriage.

Women should be emancipated from the artificial social bondage. T.N. Kitchlu in the book *Widows in India* quotes the words of Swamiji who points out “. . . as a bird with only one wing cannot fly, similarly, a nation with her women in shackles can make no progress” (5).

Widows are denied of basic rights and also basic needs, which every widow has a right to relish. Dispossession causes a systematic exploitation and dehumanization of widows, which they are expected to, face all their lives. Through a geocentric mind-set, Sidhwa questions the cruelties committed against widows, who are treated as mere objects and viewed as ill omen by the society.

CHAPTER III

THE AGONY OF WIDOWS

Of all the evils that man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity to me; the female sex, not the weaker sex.

- Mahatma Gandhi.

The novel *The Blue-Necked God* depicts the heart wrenching story of widows under the mantle of social customs and practices. The novelist depicts the tragedy and mental agony faced by the author herself after the death of her husband through the character of Saudamini. The story highlights the exploitation and poverty faced by widows who are dumped by uncaring and callous families into the so-called sacred city, Brindavan to eke the rest of their lives in prayers under the guise of tradition and sanction. The writer blames the evil and dark side of tradition and culture which plays a chief role in degrading the status of a widow.

Widows are the nastiest sufferers in the cauldron of the male hegemonic society where the customs of cultural, traditional and religious practices are enforced in a way that men maintain dominance over women. Age is no concern; as widows, they are not allowed to leave their homes and are destined to live as invisible beings as their presence is considered as misfortune or ill-omen for others.

A married woman with sindoor on her forehead has to stay away from the one who has been disqualified from using sindoor. Widows have to follow the strict eating habits, abstain themselves from cooked food and meat. Religious rituals are forced on to them, they have to fast and sing prayers through the day; they restricted from all comforts; prohibited from attending functions and all other enjoyments. They are more or less ghost figures in human form.

Hindu religion believes that widows are impure and polluted. The impurity and pollutions not only refer to the physical dirt but also with moral standards set by hypocritical men. The demise of a loved one is an extremely painful and distressing experience. Widowhood is referred to as 'paschimavastha' which implies that just as the sun goes to the west it drops its splendor and light, so does the widow who is given substandard position as she is unlucky enough to lose an omnipotent shielding husband.

The charm and beauty of life is lost when a woman becomes a widow. A widowed woman is believed as an unfortunate and an ill-fated woman and an entity of compassion. Quite often she is equated to a veena without strings and to a cart without wheels. Hence, the condition of widowhood is a great catastrophe. A widow feels abandoned and her reputation is shattered. They wear a white sari since they are supposed to have renounced the world.

Widows throng from all over the country to Brindavan, with no option and console themselves with the belief that they can avoid tragedy and misery in the next birth by rendering their service to Lord Krishna in their widowhood days. This very thought seems to be soothing, but it is a horrifying deed in practical. In the land of Lord Krishna, the widows are forsaken by the society and live a life of hunger and deprivation.

Brindavan was once considered as a safe place but now the whole place is covered with beast like human beings: "Now it was filled with wicked, wolf-like human beings, ready to pounce on innocent and unwary victims" (TBG 95). Most of the widows live on the pavements and streets, which is not conducive for them as they might be exploited physically, mentally and sexually. Brindavan is portrayed as an old and decaying town, the refuge of people in their last stage of life, where younger

widows are more prone to isolation than elder ones. The dearth of experience in life leads the young widows to face more problems when compare to the older ones, who have seen and endeavored several circumstances of widowhood and seem to be the victims of violence.

In Brindavan, Hindu widows are otherwise popularly known as radheshyamis. The radheshyamis, live in the rooms administered by the temples called as bhajan ashram. During the summer times,

The radheshyamis had long become used to this burning heat. They lived completely naked inside their rooms, so they could bear the intensity of the high temperatures. Yes, more than three thousand homeless radheshyamis had perforce to adjust to live with the great heat of the. . . summer, lying naked inside their hovels. (83)

Paanda is the head of the ashram to look into the financial matters and take care of the dwellers. The dwellers being widows believe in them and totally surrender to them with unequivocal conditions, only to realize their cunningness and hypocrisy after they have been cheated.

Saudamini, Sashiprova and Mrinalini live in the shadow of death. Each one is destined to join the omnipresent radheshyamis or the destitute widows of Brindavan and live on the edge of survival in the foul smelling, dingy, ramshackle hovels, singing bhajans in the ashrams and begging near the temples for a pittance. They are abandoned to die as radheshyamis because their families did not want any association with them in the name of religion and tradition. They are always treated as ‘other’ which refers to the minority or the least favoured social group. The male hegemonic society considers the widows as mentally ill and insane who need psychiatric

assistance as said by the author that “. . . They say they are mentally ill and in need of psychiatric help” (54).

Saudamini, the protagonist of the novel, is a young woman who loses her husband soon after her marriage that took place seven years ago. She is taken to Brindavan to live a life of piousness and to sing songs in praise of Lord Krishna in the temples which is a means to get the trifle as savings for her cremation. Society's convention and its rigorous rituals meant for the widows, puts her in grave deprivation and agitation wherein her life in Brindavan is spent without interest.

Sashiprova is one among the many young widows who is ‘united in prayer’ to the temple priest, the impotent Alamgarhi for the protection of her virginity from lustful men and with the hope of a decent funeral after her death. She is hopelessly in love with a young swami whom she can never get close to but only gaze at him from a distance. She is very well aware of the fact that if she has to move freely in Brindavan she would have to grow old, “. . . when her body would be emaciated and dried up, like a mangy street dog. . . ” (67).

Mrinalini is an aging spinster, who is denied the life of dignity and self-respect. Her father, Thakur Sahib squanders his wealth and is forced to sell his property. After her father becomes bankrupt, she has the responsibility of catering to a blind and crippled father and insane mother. Despite deprivation and loneliness, she shoulders the burden of the family and pleads to everyone to get the necessities of life. But she is abandoned by society as the stigma of widowhood followed her wherever she went. Mrinalini sees no future for herself. Her dreams of marriage and motherhood withers away as the family sink into abject of poverty. The Friends, Sashiprova and Mrinalini struggle hard to live their life. Both women are restless and destitute.

Saudamini, Sashiprova and Mrinalini are mentally strong personalities in deplorable circumstances imposed by societal norms in the name of religion culture and caste. They are marginalized and forced to live in the internalized prison of marginalization constructed by social norms and branded as incapacitate in all aspects of social life. The three women are deprived of their freedom and human dignity. As women with no moral support, they undergo an acute sense of loss, alienation, worthless, frustration and depression and seek spiritual solace.

Saudamini was not for the rigorous kind of life dictated by the society – full of restrictions regarding food, clothes, habits and lifestyle. Her curiosity drove her into the path of the forbidden avenue. She did not hesitate to do whatever was prohibited. She “. . . had started having an affair with a Christian youth soon after she became a widow” (1-2). Choosing a boy from a different religion is violation of the strict code of a Hindu widow. But for Saudamini, the only person who brought her relief and support is her lover. In her words, “Yes, he brought me consolation and comfort as no one else had been able to do” (106-107). She could not digest the fact that she has to live her remaining life as a widow, confined to the four walls of the house, which would be under continuous inspection and observation of parents, parents-in-law and society.

Saudamini’s rationality made her to look for individuality, liberty and to detach herself from the dangerous dissident systems of the society, which deprived the widows of their rights and individuality. Even her parents considered her a sinner with the very idea of Saudamini wanting to be independent and to live a life of her own. Saudamini’s boldness to cross the boundaries of widowhood and enter the forbidden zone of remarriage is broken done physically and mentally. Adinarayan Reddy in the book *Problems of Widows in India* opines that,

Widowhood is not just transition from one marital status to another after the death of the husband. Entering into widowhood is more hazardous, painful and humiliation to women than to a widower because of the discrimination, ritual sanctions of the society against the widows. With the result, widows in India not only suffer from social and economic sanctions but also face many psychological consequences, loneliness and in many cases deprivation causing emotional disturbances and imbalance. (2)

Saudamini's interest in marrying a Christian boy is completely unacceptable to the orthodox and god-fearing parents. Parents and society expect her to lead the despondent life of a widow and be subjected to the meticulous practices of rituals as part of her widowhood. Their concern was that she will be accused of transgression if she marries the Christian boy, which will be an act of bringing on disrespect to her social group and her position of widow.

In order to overcome this situation Saudamini's father Dr. Roychoudhury wanted his daughter to render her service to the sick and needy who visit his hospital which was started especially for the destitute patients. His wife, Anupama takes her daughter to visit holy place and Deoghari Baba with a hope that she would reconcile to her misfortune and be at peace with her.

Saudamini makes an effort to go by the will of her parents but it is seized by her secret rebellious nature and a growing sense of anxiety and despair. Neither does she accompany her mother to the temples, nor does she assist her father in the hospital. Instead Saudamini argued and plead for her sovereignty: ". . . I cannot spend my entire life like this, doing charity work. . . I am not a devi, I am an ordinary girl,

and I cannot pass all my years in serving society like you. . . I am an independent person, and I fear no one and nothing! . . .” (71).

For a girl of her age Saudamini thinks that the suggestion is a noble one but in practice she cannot ‘cultivate such a nobility of approach’ of sacrificing all that she desires. She firmly says that she is a woman of flesh and blood coloured by her passions and desires. Saudamini is a non-conformist and a rebel by nature since she had a mind of her own and preferred a space of her own and lives on her own terms. She dislikes to be a caged bird and so fights for her rights and equality to be a woman of the new generation.

Saudamini wanted to live a life with the Christian but her father said that he would offer his life to the Jamuna if he unleashes her. Her mother, Anupama, a god-fearing woman is not able to accept the radical behavior of her daughter embraces her untimely death due to depression and distress. Saudamini could not sustain her freedom at the cost of her father’s life and so surrenders her life to the wish of her parents. Saudamini succumbs to the pressures of the family and to the ideologies of religion that are used to propagate the concept of practicing chastity, purity and sanctity of the women and widows. Saudamini is bound by the cultural and religious practice.

Saudamini is forced to leave the man whom she loved. She is disturbed by the memory of her lover. Goswami points out that the world of Saudamini comes crushing down by the adamant behavior of her parents whom she had invested her faith and trust. Hence a strong woman like her is made weak by the patriarchal norms imposed on her by her parents and society.

Saudamini is a fallen woman in the eyes of the society, “. . . A young woman who roams about alone all over the place! The immoral fool!” (148). In contrast to this image the author brings the real self of her by saying that

She had had numerous admirers before Subroto, her husband, had come into her life and shown her how divine true love could be. But in spite of the pleadings and persuadings of her admirers, she had never given in to them, had never allowed any of them to take liberties with her body. No, she had never done such things. So then, why was she in this situation. . . . (171)

Saudamani is brought to Brindavan by her pious and conservative parents with the hope that her stay at Brindavan for a few years might change her mind, make her forget about the Christian youth, fetch her peace, accept her misfortune with equanimity and bring her face to face with realities of life. Saudamini “. . . had not slept at all, and now, with her tangled hair and rumpled clothes, she looked like a mad woman wandering along aimlessly” (72-73). She tries to familiarize herself with the new atmosphere, wanders restlessly around and observes the flow of life in Brindavan, admiring its beauty as well as its darker side, talking to different people in a hope to find answer to questions of her troubled mind but the enlightenment she seeks eludes her. Her condition turns miserable as she starts realizing the realities that exist in the sacred city.

Widowhood leads to sorrows, worries, misfortunes, problems, instability, fear, dependency, no courage, struggle, in all a combination of many problems. In the male patriarchal society women right from her birth are under privileged. When a woman turns as a widow, she is completely directionless due to lack of proper knowledge, education, and is ignorant about the truths of life. Many of the widows have never

assumed of becoming independent. As the bread winner is no longer with them, they face financial crisis which lead them to beg and squat at holy places like Brindavan.

On the day that Saudamini arrives at the holy city in the month of August, which is the season of festivities. It is a congregation where people gather to celebrate festival like Jhulan, and Radha Ashtami. Saudamini sees the sanyasis, priests, the rich and poor from various sects roaming in the streets with white dust etched as patterns on their faces and bodies. The rich people visited the city since it is a belief one will be redeemed of their sin if they distribute food and clothes to the beggars. This task is not because men are compassionate towards the wretched condition of the poor but to cleanse themselves of their sins and with the fear that they would be punished by god for the sin and crime they commit.

Ankut festival is another occasion when a large crowd of poverty-stricken widows throng to view offerings of the devotees which turn out to be huge mountains of food. This again is with a superstitious belief that if one witnesses the mountain like offerings they would be freed from the pain of hunger. During this time “The begging bowls that the rows upon rows of leapers held were full of coins” (50).

Saudamini, out of curiosity asks the old widows about their upkeep. She gets a spontaneous reply from the radeshyamis that they squat and beg and reside at the temples the whole night to get a handful of ‘prasadam’ the following morning. Sometimes they watch over decaying corpses in order to get alms. The widows “. . . could not afford to sleep for long. They had to get to the temple to sing bhajans and they had to be on time” (42).

Saudamini visits a group of widows who lived in small and dark rooms. She was shocked to see that they lived in the dark and small dilapidated rooms that looked more like pigeon holes than ‘human habitation’. Saudamini’s life begins in the same

way like any other widow in the town. She too lived in a small dank room in the Dasarath Akhara which she feels suffocating. Her room is no better than the others. There is no opening in any of the walls for the sun and air to penetrate. Saudamini has her own fear that the walls of the rooms would collapse and crush her and would turn her into a dehumanized ghost. It is described that

. . . showed Saudamini into a small room towards the back of the building. She felt suffocated as soon as she entered the dark room. There seemed to be no opening in any of the walls for the sun or air to enter, and it seemed as though the room had been built underground. In the darkness she started feeling along the walls. . . . (13)

Goswami gives a graphic account of the widows of how they were grossly undernourished, limbs crippled by leprosy and wore dirty faded old dhotis, their forehead shone with bibhuti and lines with holy sandalwood. In a verbal exchange a man looks down upon widows who utters that they are wretched souls. He says that he hates the very existence it sullies the fair name of the holy place. He calls the existence as vulgar as they hide money in their waist clothes and this leaves him disappointed while he searches for money in the dead bodies.

To her dismay Saudamini finds that the holy place is a place full of delusion, a place with no hope of redemption. She finds that people out of despair and delusion gather to meet Baba and priests with a hope that they have the magic power to redeem their grief. Saudamini learns that the widows were compelled to sing though they were starving. She learns that “They had to sing the Lord’s praises as loud as they could even if they were on the verge of choking” (23). She tours around Brindavan and gets to know more miserable stories from the old widows who narrate the vulnerabilities of the women where they are expected to be safe and secure. To quote

the cackles, ““One day, this wicked man was observing our legs. As soon as we knew this, we fled and saved ourselves. . . . See, look at our legs.’ And they pulled their tattered clothes up to their knees and exposed their legs” (22). They were leprosy women. Saudamini goes stiff out of fright when one of them touches her.

Though some women belong to respectable and educated family, they have been degraded by incurable disease, extreme poverty, in human conditions and subjected to indecent living after widowed. They showed no shame in asking “Give us some donation to keep us alive. You people live to eat, but we need to eat something in order to live. Give us something to keep us alive” (22).

It is said that on festive days they gorge on rotting food distributed in the name of charity and fall sick. Goswami records the sarcastic comments by priest who said that in a particular year, the widows were able to appease their hunger with water melons which was sold at a cheap rate –Twenty pieces for a paisa and so

. . . Some of them eat such large quantities of the fruit that they will sit on the steps of the crowded temples and die of indigestion and vomiting in full view of the pilgrims and. . . even as the dead bodies lie there waiting to be cremated. . . two groups of those notorious body carriers will start fighting for whatever money or items the poor women might possess. . . some of their blows falling on the dead bodies too. . . The things that happen at. . . And this is the holiest of holy places! The centre of the universe!. (35)

A large number of widows who are unable to support themselves economically and do not receive outside help as well and continue to be in a state of destitution. The helpless destitute lead a pitiable life – a life of beggars in rags lying in dark alley eating crumbs thrown by devout pilgrims and a hellish life too completely

devoid of dignity or peace. They looked more like creatures in a dilapidated state. To quote the words of the widows, “When necessary, we sit at the gates of the Tortoise Temple, and at Rangaji and beg. When there is no other way, we spend the whole night in front of the temple, waiting and hoping for the *malcha* offerings” (21).

The life of a widow is perpetual worry about money, food, clothing and shelter with no relief from any of these. Widows in the past had received assistance by doing charitable work in the temples and religious foundations. But in the present time she is no longer left to charity, her fate is decided by others. Such a life is demoralizing, and nobody can complain of widows’ apathy and slowness to help herself in such circumstances. Saudamini, Sashiprova and Mrinalini are treated as objects of men’s scorn and atrocities. Society fails to treat them as human beings and realize that they need the support of the family and the society to lead a normal life as others.

Saudamini as a young widow is full of life, with lots of hopes and dreams. Wanting to get her life back, she desires to marry the Christian man but again this is a myth that widows are not supposed to have the pleasures of life, they should spend their rest of life with a rigorous ritual practice to attain salvation.

At times, Saudamini wonders about her life and whispers to herself that

Why had she studied. . . Was it merely because of her enthusiasm for higher degrees, or was it as a precaution against future insecurity?

Most girls like her did not think of answering such questions. She too, had no answer. . . she seemed to hear a whisper in her ears, ‘Time is speeding past like a winged arrow. Be careful how you utilize it, else it will fly past and leave you behind in the tangled and spiky bushes of bygone days!’. (98)

She shares to her friend, Chandrabhanu Rakesh, the feelings and the cause of depression that has taken hold of her; discloses about the waves of passion and desire that over power her when she find young couple in love on the river bank.

Saudamini no longer feels restrained. She openly admits how erotic her feeling was longing for physical union after seeing the couple. She narrates

The other day I saw a young couple. They were sleeping under a dimaru tree on the parikrama path. There was a peculiar smell in the waters of the Jamuna river, I don't know what the smell was, but it was not at all pleasant, like the smell of newly butchered meat. Something happened to me, I do not know what. That unnatural smell from the river, that couple lying under that tree. . . . I lay down the sands of Jamuna, and started rolling about. At one time, my clothes slipped off. The feel of the sands on my naked body was something very strange, unusual. (106)

Patriarchal society which claims female eroticism to be a sin and self-consuming is overthrown when Saudamini acknowledges her physical longing. Goswami takes the side of Saudamini and states that a woman is nurtured to suppress emotions and hence advocates that a widow like Saudamini must be liberated from the shackles of patriarchy. She reiterates that her husband's memories do not arouse any kind of desire and fascination and no longer has any feelings of his demise. To her clinging to the memories of life with her husband will deny her of her mobility that she ardently pines for. She has a strong belief that it is her lover who can offer her comfort and assurance of hope.

There is a clash between Saudamini's carnal desire and her social role as a widow. As she battles with her feelings of despondency and guilt, she meets other

people who have come to terms with their suffering through faith or artistic expression. Saudamini is constantly tormented by paranoia, doubts and factual questions to which she had no ready answers.

Saudamini started to question herself whether there was another girl like her to face situations as these. Saudamini wanted to know if there was any one like her in the land of Brindavan. She manages to ask an old radheshyami

. . . you cannot completely erase all memories of your husband from your mind. But now so many years have passed since he died. Tell me truly, have you never tried, after all these years, to wipe away all thoughts and memories of him. . . .And what about your physical hunger? Tell me the truth. . . . (167)

She asks a pious widow whether she has overcome desires like her own and to her astonishment the woman admits that she too was not able to control emotions and has been struggling with it from her youth.

Saudamini learns from the widow that even after sacrificing everything they are not able to find peace. She further adds that though time which will heal every wound does not do so in the case of widows. The pious lady goes to the extent of comparing the smoothness of her prayer beads with that of chameli blossoms which she associates it to desire and youth. This shows that many young widows are not able to conform to the 'penance imposed on them.' The writer constantly reminds that widows are dissolute women.

In quest for answers to her question, Saudamini discovers the dual and hidden life of the widows, who are victims to male hegemony. She comes across Sashiprova who serves the priest as a helper during the day and made to share his room in the

evenings in the name of 'jugal Upasana' – a form of worship done as a pair.

Sashiprova is a victim of sexual exploitation in the name of rituals.

To understand their mindset and feelings Goswami writes that both women converse and one must understand that 'a woman can understand another woman's feelings.' Sashiprova says that she has ". . . been plagued by uncertainties for some time. I hear that you have gone through a great deal of sorrow and suffering. Tell me, how do you propose to live out the rest of your days?" (62). They share their experiences and seems that they have taken a decision about their life, but they fear to express their wishes to this conventional society.

The exploitation of women, especially of the widows in Brindavan suggest that it is the violation of the natural order. The Hindu legends states that men are 'purush' and the women are 'prakriti' or Nature. The author in the novel makes a mention that ". . . The one and only purush in Brindavan was the flute playing Lord Sri Krishna. All else was prakriti" (109).

Radheshyamis are considered to be personification of nature. So, violence against women is violence against nature. Nature stands defenseless when she is repeatedly destroyed and deforested by sadistic men. So are radheshyamis when they are forced to cut off their locks. Just as nature remains still when men strip off its beauty by uprooting trees so do women who remain silent to their dilapidated condition. Women and nature silently accept the pain and violence shown to them by society. Women and nature go together in all aspects – mothers, nurtures, protects, provides shelter and gives mental gratification. They are unlike men who live for their personal interests and satisfaction by destroying serenity and nature.

The legends and religion give an upright position in society. The lines "Radharani Ki Jai", "Jai Yamunaji Jai", show that society gives women a respectable

position by worshipping them in the form of Radharani but at the same time in the name of religion, society exploits, ill-treats and demoralizes them. This is a reflection of the hypocritical nature of society.

The young widows have lost their right to exist with self-esteem. The patriarchal society frames iron rules in the name of religion to suppress and trap widows. The treatment of widows by the society makes them face poverty and forces to trade themselves to men. They are tortured mentally and physically, by paandas. Paandas who are to be their guardians take a different role in plundering the corpses of their possessions.

Saudamini witnesses one such incident when a paanda arrives as if he were a Yamadoot, or God of death to the spot where a widow die. He is present to search the body for the gold ornaments or money, the meager savings which the widow might have hidden or tied to her waistbands hoping to be given a decent funeral. This is the usual practice so, when the old widows see him, they crouch close together and witness “The paanda started throwing the dead woman’s things around, looking through them. . . the man started poking about the dead body. Who knew, perhaps the old woman had hidden away gold or silver coins on her person” (14). There is not a single person who dares protest against such practices. Saudamini realizes the grim life ahead as she sees the personal “. . . belongings of the dead woman lay scattered all around: a heap of old, tattered clothes of various discoloured shades, her clay pitcher for drinking water, the cow-dung fuel that she used to keep warm in winter” (13).

The writer shows how the administration is corrupt and the widows being victimized by the paandas. If the body of the widows were not cremated properly, the other widows insisted at them asking them to do it in a right way, but the paandas

would shout at them saying “. . . Shut up! Shut up! I will send four men to remove the corpse. They will take the body and dump it in the Jamuna” (15). The ‘they’ to whom the paanda refers to are four men who are specially deputed by him to dispose the corpse unceremoniously into Jamuna.

Radheshyam is addresses these four men as vultures, who smell the dead. When an old woman died in the crowd at Radha Ashtami mela or when another was crushed to death in the stampede during Ranganath Rath mela, these men loitered near the corpses with the hope that one of these old women might have a gold tooth. They are delegated to drag away unclaimed dead bodies, from the crowded place of Brindavan on occasions like the eighty-krosh-long sacred circumambulation of Brindavan, the popular Nanda Utsav, the Holi festival and the Haronga festival.

The writer draws attention towards the Munshis, paandas and other men who deprive the widows of their savings. These savings are made from big sacrifices like sing bhajans on empty stomach to accumulate the pittance they earn from temple priest as well as foregoing their meals many a times. The priests do not hesitate to pocket the hard-earned money of the widows. They prove to be corrupt by misappropriating the donations and contributions by rich donors and temple trusts for maintaining the ashrams. The author says that the paandas and accountants enjoy at the expense of the widow’s money that “. . . got so fat on the radheshyami’s money, that he cannot get up now” (21). Widows are left to their wretched fate and die like the street dogs. This implies that even after the death of the widows of Brindavan, due reverence or homage was not given to their dead bodies.

Men exploit these helpless widows in different ways. The munshis (the secretaries) during the day engages widows to do their household chores and temple duties and at night to accompany them in their beds. There is nothing pure, inspiring,

spiritual or good about munshis or paandas or holy men whose eyes pin upon the fleshy curves of the youthful women's physiques than anything else.

Men do not even spare old radheshyamis. They treat even them like young women and drag them out for their lustful desire – “Those wicked fellows have started abusing these poor old radheshyamis because they cannot find any young ones. ‘These depraved fellows! These monsters, may their mouths be infested with horrible pests!’” (152). A few radheshyamis unable to cope with the harsh reality opt to surrender themselves to the lust of men.

Charanbehari, the tourist guide and a middleman to the Paanda is enticed by the beauty of Saudamini though she is of his daughter's age. His gaze objectifies her. Charanbehari involves himself in the ‘extra pleasures to follow the moon-faced beauty,’ Saudamini. He observes her to find that,

. . . she was not wearing sindur, the mark of a married woman, in the parting in her hair. There was no mangal sutra around her neck, nor was she wearing any toe rings, other signs to show that she was married. She was not wearing the stark white sari of a widow either since young girls did not wear those nowadays. (7)

Charanbehari immediately fantasizes a physical relationship and compares it to his first sexual encounter. He even recalls how a group of swindlers treated a group of young widows from Kummilla, Rajshashi and East Dinajpur, were left to starve for many days to make them to do anything for food. The widows were used as a means to satiate their perverse sexual urge, which is well described by Charanbehari who says they were “Like butchers examining animals before buying them, the young men would make these young widows strip off their clothes in order to examine their bodies thoroughly and make sure that they were without any blemishes” (8).

The author highlights the cultural camouflage that treat widows as an object fulfill their needs. Women are not treated with compassion by the patriarchal society that pushes them to the status of the other. The women, who subjugate to the rapacious men neither receive social gratification nor humane consideration. But Saudamini is fortunate to escape from men like Charanbehari as she was with her parents which deterred the predators like him.

Widows are forced into prostitution or ‘united in prayer’ with priests and paandas. They are compelled to sleep with men. They are victims of sexual abuse because they are surrounded by wicked and licentious people in Brindavan. Many priests have kept penniless widows in their rooms. The deprived widows are guaranteed that on their demise there would be someone to perform their rituals and look into their funeral rites. In return the priests get their work done by the widows.

Sashiprova, is one such unfortunate woman, who lives with Alamgarhi, a eunuch for her personal security. She wishes to live like other radheshyamis but changes her decision when she thinks of what will become of her which is stated by sidhwa as,

She could line up with the beggars at the bhandars or she could sit at the temples with her leaf plate when bhog was distributed, or she could go with the radheshyamis to the bhajan ashrams and sing bhajans for half a day and earn at least twenty-five paise. So she would never have to die of starvation. But, she needed to be at least twenty years older to live like that. . . then perhaps she would be able to sit without any resentment or worry at the bhandars!. (67)

She says that she has no other choice but to live with him, “There are many women like me. . . who live with priests or paandas in the name of Jugal Upaasana,

worshipping the Divine as a couple. Women who have no one in the wide world to call their own, women who live in constant fear of their bleak futures” (59). He makes an attempt to harm her but was unable to, being a eunuch.

The author depicts the ambiguous status of Sashiprova’s relationship with the priest when Mrinalini poses a question on Sashiprova if Alamgarhi, the priest has not harmed or spoilt her in sharing a room with him. Sashiprova replies, “One day, he asked me to disrobe completely in front of him and I did. He scrutinized my body thoroughly in the light of the lamp. Then he put out the lamp and went and slept in his own bed” (59). Sashiprova does not protest for his actions because he does not molest her physically and she is grateful to Alamgarhi for giving her shelter.

Alamgarhi is aware that she gains satisfaction of taking shelter in the priest’s room instead of living in a dingy pigeon hole where other widows lived. He uses this as a weapon to exploit her. The author highlights that in the name of providing security, Sashiprova get tortured by the friends of Alamgarhi, who are erotic in nature.

Thus, Saudamini’s life becomes more crucial where, “. . . a group of idle young men, having nothing better to do, took to spending their time roaming around outside her room, or standing in front of it, waiting for her to come out” (88). These incidents show the vulnerability of the priests and paandas who instead of helping the deprived women take an opportunity of their feebleness. However, Sashiprova is plagued by the thought of being stripped of her clothes and craves for a stronger and more passionate relationship.

Sashiprova never feels dejected of being outraged by the society, “Nothing other people said had ever touched her or worried her but at the same time, she knew that after all any scandal involving a woman was a disgrace. It was the one thing that

people took great pleasure to unearth and gossip about” (67). In distress she manages to live at the same place with Alamgarhi.

The routine life is disrupted when the temple of Thakur Sahib that Sashiprova was serving in is sold off and Alamgarhi loses his position as priest. She is unable to comprehend her future which to her seems an unpredictable and a bleak one.

Sashiprova is left to fend for herself but she is too old to make a living by making garlands or grinding sandal paste or to beg alms like radheshyamis.

Sashiprova is shocked by the thought that there is no place for shelter, relapses into the world of ill-fated and unfortunate. She tells Saudamini,

For a long time I have spent my days serving the temple’s Lord Damodar. Now I will have to live with Alamgarhi as his mistress. We have not been married, but we will have to live as husband and wife. Can you imagine anything worse than this? Some old women who can no longer sing bhajans as radheshyamis often live like this, hoping that the man will provide for their last rites, or out of fear. But me?! No, you will probably not understand these things. (63)

Sashiprova’s status reaches a crisis after the death of Alamgarhi and her frantic search for kind patron to protect her from wild men goes in vain. Sashiprova fears that she might be thrown into a worst situation. After the break-up she really faces the hardship and starts roaming from place to place to live. She desperately prays “Dear God, she pleaded silently, please don’t let anyone else be in my position. Don’t make anyone as lonely and vulnerable as I am” (65). She hopes that no woman should live a helpless and hopeless existence where the norms of religion, culture and tradition usurp them of their rights and dignity.

Priests and paandas gathered in Sashiprova’s place and one of the unknown

men shouted at her,

I have come here with Alamgarhi's permission. . . . We know of your separation from him, but it all depends upon you. I too have come here with a proposal. I mean, I too have a temple, and I want a woman like you to help me in my work. If you accept my proposal, you will have to help me just as you helped Alamgarhi. I mean, if necessary, you will have to sleep with me too. And believe me when I say that a group of men at the Ramleela ground have become unprotected state and are waiting to take advantage of this situation. But I am a man of determination, and I will not stop at anything. . . . (89)

Frightened Sashiprova loses herself and decides to leave that place.

Finally, she takes shelter in a ghetto but is driven out by other widows since Sashiprova is a target for the predators, and so they fear that they too will be chased, physically assaulted, disturbed and molested by drunken louts. In sidhwa's words, "The radheshyamis. . . started abusing her, saying that she was like a piece of raw meat, easy prey for the vultures that were closing in on her. They told her that they could not let her stay with them anymore. Her clothes were also almost in tatters. . . (113).

With no place to go, Sashiprova finally approaches Mrinalini, who in spite of her precarious situation offers shelter. They sail on the same boat. The women "In the deep darkness. . . lay on the floor, arms entwined around each other. But at this moment, crushed with the fears of an unknown and fearsome future, they looked more like two innocent children" (136). Sashiprova finds peace once she goes to Mrinalini.

Mrinalini advises Sashiprova to lead a virtuous life rather than staying with priests or paandas, which is stated as:

Now that he is no more, those dogs who go smelling out young widows and bad women will have a field day with you. They know very well that there is no one to protect you now. And listen, those Babajis who have nothing and no one to support them will be after you to go and live with them as helpers. Be careful. . . . Even if you starve, it is better to die a good and virtuous woman by the roadside than that. (135)

Sashiprova decides to lead a worthy and honourable life, not making any more mistakes in her life.

The author conveys that all practices in Brindavan have a lustful tinge, spirituality and devotion lost, and corruption veils the legend or myth of Krishna. The bodies of widows are ravaged, their minds broken due to penury and lack of family support.

Saudamini with no option to fulfill her desires chooses death. Though her wish to surrender to that all ‘consuming love’ get fulfilled when she is given an opportunity to meet her lover, makes her happy and it seemed to her as reunion of two pure flowers. She tells him “At this moment everything has become very simple. Kiss me, or embrace me like those passionate lovers. Everything has become simple at this moment. I have been waiting so eagerly for this day” (177).

Though in the end her father makes up his mind to help his daughter lead a new and healthy path by permitting her to marry the Christian youth whom she loves, Saudamini disappears in the river with her white sari. She was haunted by the thought that society will not allow them to live a happy life. She would be considered an outcast as she is with a Christian man.

Saudamini has always insisted on her reluctance to live a life of a deprived

widow but after meeting her lover she finds no place to go back. At this juncture there is “A poignantly sad cry of loneliness floated out from the heart of this tumult. A nameless sorrow tore her heart apart. Was this really what she wanted, she wondered again, exactly this?” (179). But she is afraid of the society and people, which makes her to take a decision and on her return she walks into the furious river with a question “. . . Why? Why did this have to happen?” (182).

Saudamini takes her reign of life by plunging into the river as a sign of rejection of the ascetic life. Other than her white widow’s cloth everything drowned in the river “. . . which was found early in the morning, entangled with the colorful chaddar of a woman with a living husband” (182). To save her parents from shame and discomfiture and to prevent herself from going back to the painful refuge of her dead husband’s tenacious memory she decides to end her life.

People weave their own tales. She is regarded as an incarnation of voluptuousness by the hypocritical society. The author writes with a heavy heart that white chaddar, trampled under the feet of the hegemonic crowd becomes a stone writing tablet of scandal mongering. Sudamini’s story narrates the slim chances for widows to lead a decent, peaceful and a happy life as beliefs are associated with tradition and culture. It curtails the individual freedom and women and widows fall a prey.

Goswami writes on the attempts made by widows to break free from the clutches of the iron chains of rituals practices bulldogged by tools of patriarchal dominance. She brings out the degree of discrimination due to religion, caste and culture and that which are used as weapons of suppression, oppression and inhuman acts.

Religion and culture conspire to frame rules and law for the widows and act as

a surveillance tool. It expects widow to take whatever comes in their way as a gift of fate. Goswami questions the very foundation of the imposed practices of widowhood.

In an interview, in conversation with Sudeshna B. Baruah in the Hindustan Times

Goswami says

. . . turning a widow myself at the age of 26, took me into the malpractices attached with widowhood. Like she has to keep away from men, from foods considered aphrodisiacs. . . My writings on widowhood and my raising a voice against its malpractices did bring about an attitudinal change towards the widows. . . . (n.p.)

Goswami challenges the unwritten norms of patriarchy. The author establishes the fact that women should shatter the shackles of patriarchy to create an identity of their own. The writer through the story of Saudamini unravels the 'octopus clutch' of the hegemonic society and how she tries to dismantle it. The author breaks the cocoon of the patriarchal society which makes a woman a mere puppet in the hands of men who determine the destiny of hapless women. The author advocates that the attitude of society towards widows should change. Goswami strongly puts forth that women should have a control of their life to lead an empowered life and a liberated one. Society can prosper only if it gives equal rights, freedom, privileges to all irrespective of gender.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMATION

In the Indian patriarchal society, men exercise hegemony over the so-called weaker sex and harass them mentally, physically and sexually. Indian society is marked by deep gender inequality. The society clearly demarcates between the sexes and delineates the ideological structure necessary for binding a woman's hand and foot in all aspects of life including social, economic and moral sectors. Women are surrounded by a male-centered universe from the beginning. They form half of the world's population, looking after the earth and its beings, yet saddled by difficulties connected with children, men, and the environment. One fails to realize that it is not just a woman who is affected but it is the entire humanity on account of the oppression of women.

The position of women during the Vedic period was glorious after which there are perceptible changes in the status of women. Gradually there is an all-around decline and women lose their identity along with being assigned a subordinate status. To one's dismay, in practice, women are subjected to repression and exploitation by men. Women are the gifts of God; they should be treated well by their families and the society, but are denied equal rights in family and society.

Women endure sufferings from their birth. Their position deteriorates due to injustices shown towards them like child marriage, abuse, violence, political neglect, social exploitation, rape, dowry, compulsory widowhood, prostitution, disempowerment, discrimination, poverty and torments by sadistic men in their day to day life. Women's liberty is void in the name of pride, social prestige, family welfare and religion.

In India the birth of a girl child is not embraced and celebrated by family and society. Whereas, the birth of a baby boy is rejoiced with great dedication and splendour. The unfairness and bias start even before girl children are born – they are slain even as a foetus, and if they are born to see the day light, they are treated austere and harshly by the society.

Despite of women empowerment still there is discrimination, which starts to ruin their life right from childhood. Parents normally do not allow girl children to schools whereas, boys in the family are offered education. Girl children are demanded to aid their mothers in domestic chores. Sidhwa in her novel highlights the despondent life of Chuyia, who is not sent to school but her parents provide her brothers with education. Meanwhile, she is constantly trained and made to do household works. Mothers in family occupy their time in grooming their girl children to become good wives and focus very little on offering them knowledge and awareness. Chuyia's mother, Bhagya too grooms her child by assigning her all the duties of a woman such as cleaning, washing, planting and cooking, so as to make her a good house wife.

Many parents in the Indian patriarchal society consider the girl child as a burden. They believe that a male child is the breadwinner and source of income of their family and a member who will keep the family legacy; while the girl child is to be eventually married off to some other family. Thus, parents decide to marry off their daughters immediately to lighten their burdens. In the case of Chuyia, she is married to a rich old widowed man, Hira Lal in order to get rid of the dowry. Chuyia's parents like all other parents fail to understand the small child and ruin her life at the tender age.

Child marriage is an immoral inhuman act. It is also considered as a physical evil. It changes the life of small girls like Chuyia, where they are considered as a prey

by lustful men. Marriage also leads children like Chuyia to ruin their healthy lives. Chuyia, who is to be at school, is expected to bear a child. If child marriage exists, women cannot make any progress and they will not enjoy the pleasure of girlhood.

Women as a part of society shoulder the burdens of the family and society. The patriarchal society orders women to look after their houses after their marriage. Men never perform any task at home and they never take care of women and try to understand their difficulties, but women are ordered to take care of her husband, son and parents-in-law. Men are contented to build walls and forts for security. But the shelter of home is in the hands of women. A Mother beyond any concern for her own benefits looks after her sons and wishes that they lead a successful life in society.

Though women are held responsible for the livelihood of their husbands, parents-in-law and children, yet they are not given freedom of decision making, freedom of thought and freedom of speech. Malladi Subbamma in the book *Women: Tradition and Culture* states that,

Women are slaves to society and tradition. They are slaves to male domination. They are slaves to ignorance. Not only that. They do not enjoy equality with men in social, economic, political and cultural sectors of life. They do not have freedom. They are slaves to their husbands and their families. Women have no individuality. They are not allowed to aspire for individual freedom. (4)

Women in the patriarchal male hegemonic set-up receive little attention and their ill experience is not considered by the society.

Women in rural areas become prey to men and they become dolls in the hands of their husbands. Hence, a woman's path is full of hurdles. Women fear to take decisions independently and have to get permission from their husband to do what

they desire be it for themselves or for the family. In the novel, *Water*, when Bhagya stands against the marriage of her daughter Chuyia to an old widower, her husband Somnath shouts at her badly. He orders her to obey and follow him as he plans. The society where Bhagya lives pressurizes women to blindly go along with the decisions of men. With the religious belief, Bhagya, like all other women, think that a woman should adhere strictly to the thoughts of her husband. Hence, she stays mute in the verdict of her daughter's life.

Religion condemns women to slavery; society restricts development of the personality; and men suppress her talents. It preaches that a woman can attain fame and name by serving her husband. It ordains several tasks and prescribes attitudes for women such as obeying her husband by neither exhibiting her efficiency, nor her talents in conversing with her husband, but to be an embodiment of patience and to serve her husband in a pleasant manner. Though a husband's actions are wrong, a wife has no freedom to question against it and should stay subdued. In *The Blue-Necked God* the novelist defines the miserable and annoyed state of married women in the male hegemonic society through the words of Mrinalini's mother, Anupama, who with an emotional tone speaks to her husband, Thakur Sahib:

Long ago, when you were busy with wine and women, I prayed to God to give me one opportunity, just one chance, to make you sit on the chair and listen to my 'sweet' words! I lost my youth a long time ago. You, too, are old, and there is no question now of having 'sweet' word between us! I have nothing to feel sorry about now. (TBG 85)

Like Anupama, many women, feel enraged on the misconducts of their husband and have no say other than to accept whatever their husband does.

In the case of an unmarried woman, a woman has to watch over all her problems even when she is with her family. The challenges that women undergo in their lives are multifarious. Many unmarried women like Mrinalini face issues like loneliness, poverty, sexual harassment and abuse. She as an aging spinster looks after her parents and supports them financially and runs through a tough life. She guards her crippled father and insane mother. When her family laments on poverty, she holds the responsibility of protecting her parents. She has a desire to get married and beget children, but her dreams are shattered because of dearth and duty.

Women in general, undergo difficulties be it a spinster or a barren woman. If a woman is married and barren the condition is despondent. Women are more often blamed for the situation of childlessness. In *Water*, Shakuntala, who is a barren woman, is controlled sadistically by her mother-in-law. The society and family members fail to realize that the cause of infertility hinge on both genders. Hence, Shakuntala is often blamed and seen as the problem for her infertility.

Girls, at times, lose their husbands at a tender age and become widows. When death hits the better-half, a man loses a home-maker, but a woman loses a provider. A widow deals with a much serious condition than that of a widower. But a widower being strongly and economically autonomous does not feel the loss of his wife and is not subjected to the stigma of the society, as much as a woman because when a wife dies, a man is not often addressed as a 'widower' nor is he expected to change his lifestyle. Widowhood is viewed not as another phase in a woman's life but is considered as a private and public aberration. There are severe social, economic and cultural implications of widowhood. It is one of the saddest facts of existence and certainly an unhappy and miserable state.

In the case of Chuyia, when Hira Lal dies of illness, the society blames Chuyia, as it is a belief that the sins committed by her in the previous birth is the cause of her husband's death. Thus, to purify her sin and soul, she is expected to spend the rest of her life in devotion. It is believed that continuous chanting of prayer will get her salvation. The list of gender discrimination is endless. A widower remains exceptional whereas a widow is subjected to indignities. A widow is made to mourn lifelong for the death of her husband. Men have to shed their ego and women have to overcome the image of weaker sex or their deprived state. Both genders need to change their mindsets in order to establish gender equality.

In the novel, *Water Kalyani* and *Chuyia*, two beautiful young widows lose their phase of childhood at six and are ostracized at the widows' ashram where the society coerces them to take up the ardent religious rituals and practices. In order to protect a girl child from the curse of widowhood, the society has to rise against child marriage. Child marriage obligates small children to suffer physically, mentally and emotionally like Chuyia and Kalyani, who before their puberty are rushed into a life of adulthood in order to serve and look after their husbands. It also leads them to undergo the tormenting life of womanhood and widowhood during childhood days.

Sidhwa and Goswami in the novels *Water* and *The Blue-Necked God* respectively record the barbaric practices, which are disturbing images of widows, exposing them to humiliation, physical and mental torture and to experience the trauma of isolation. Hence a woman is imperiled to a distressing nomenclature and lifestyle. Widows are presented as the most burdened, violated and invisible beings as their voices are unheard.

Widows face inhuman treatments and untold hardships like oppression, denial, rejection, insecurity, hunger and poverty. These practices are said to be founded on

the prevailing traditions of Indian society. Institutional marriage and male hegemony are aspects of Indian traditional society, which foster violation of the rights of the widows.

Widows suffer from oppression, which make them to groan and mourn throughout their life span but there is nobody to listen to their grievance and miseries. They are deprived of all the fundamental human rights which leave them to face continuous frustration and depression for the rest of their lives. Sidhwa and Goswami oppose the ideologies of the patriarchal society towards cultural hegemony, which places women especially widows in the position of a victim. Religion plays a vital role in women's life after the demise of their husbands.

The culture and tradition of Indian society expect widows to adhere strictly to the unwritten ordinances and rituals of widowhood. Widows are destined to undergo treacherous mourning rites in the society and family. They have to adhere to harsh rules with respect to their dress, habits and food. The attire of widows is white sarees and they are forced to avoid all marital marks which include bangles and Kumkum. Even a child widow like Chuyia is not freed from following the custom. She is constrained to wear a white sari and tonsure her head; denied of all marital marks including mangal sutra, bindi, bangles and kumkum.

Widows are also barred from using perfumes, ornaments, fine clothing, flowers and making of hair. In most cases, they are made to shave their heads denoting their husbands' death. They are denied of beautiful things that other women relish. In certain other cases widows are deprived of three meals a day, they are made to sleep on the bare floor and experience many other untold hardships. The society orders widows like Chuyia, Kalyani, Shakuntala, Saudamini and Sashiprova to have

sattvic food in order to control their sexual arousal. According to Hindu tradition eating spicy, sweet and oil food is a depravity.

After the demise of a husband, a woman is expected to follow vegetarian diet and live in isolation by avoiding social reunions such as wedding ceremony and festivals. Traditional superstitions mark the presence of widows as inauspicious and polluted because their lives tangle between death and sexual desires of men. Widow's stigmatization and distress are worsened by custom and religious symbolism. They are considered as cursed beings and are associated with witchcraft. It is disdainfully stated that a widowed woman cannot be cleansed or purified by even a hundred baths. The misconceptions lead the society to ostracize and abuse widows.

Widows like Kalyani and Sashiprova are denied from appearing at any cultural and social occasions, caste rituals and ceremonies. They are not allowed to touch any married women. Widows are considered polluted and so have to be cautious that even their shadow do not fall on married women because they feel that it is a bad omen as stated in the novel *Water*, "You've polluted me. I have to bathe again!" (*Water* 73). This shows that widows are treated as untouchables.

Widowhood is condemned and seen as a matter of shame. In *Water*, when Narayan confesses to his mother about his relationship with Kalyani, she opposes his idea of marrying a widow. She further adds that, it is a sin and the family will fall into curse if he marries her. A widow in India has since times immemorial been looked upon as the manifestation of all that is evil and a harbinger of bad luck.

In the male patriarchal society, widows are regarded as evil eyes, the purveyors to doom. They are treated like homeless destitute. In the name of renunciation widows are left to live in the ashrams. Family should be a moral support to women's distress. But widows like Kalyani and Sashiprova are abandoned by their

relatives and they do not have the choice to return back to their homes. The relatives are ready to grab the right to uphold the property in case of the absence of a legal heir.

Chuyia, Kalyani, Sashiprova, Shakuntala and Madhumati are forsaken by the family members and are deserted in the temple towns where they beg and chant prayers for their livelihood. They attain this state because of their relatives who do not wish to help them financially leave them abandoned to fend for themselves in the ashrams for widows, a place of refuge to live a life of squalor and indignity. Due to lack of education and training, widows are demoralized and exploited. In some places, widows work as servants within the husband's family.

Widows are oppressed through a variety of channels, including religion and tradition. In this case, tradition acts as victimizer of the widows because widows are considered as failed women who can neither escape tradition nor their expectations. When they lose their husbands, their condition is worsened. Women are dependent on their husbands even to take care of their basic needs and this becomes the biggest problem of their life when they are widowed. Despite the law favouring women with equal rights, men make them to face the hostile atmosphere by denying their rights. When widows lose their husbands, they lose financial assistance and are considered a financial burden to the family. They are considered as ill-omen by family and society. Thus, in the name of pride and prestige, women as widows are sent to stay in the holy cities but there is no question about men, and they are left scot free.

The protagonist, Saudamini in *The Blue-Necked God* never thinks of going to the holy city, but her situation and compulsion by the society turns her life upside down. She finds no peace and wanders in the streets of Brindavan. Religion and tradition dictate harsh rules for Saudamini. She feels as a non-existent. She at first

believes that, being widowed is a kind of shift and transposition, but later realizes it as an entirely different phase of life.

In a patriarchal society a woman without a man turns into a non-entity. In India, many laws are passed to defend women especially widows since independence. Many measures have been taken for the betterment of widow's life, but the condition of widows remains to be miserable. No one questions the ill-treatment caused to widows in the male hegemonic society.

The tradition and custom of the society compel women to endure the distress of widowhood. The society does not allow them to remarry. If they do so they would lead a better life. Widows' remarriage is forbidden by the society though it is legalized. It is prohibited in the higher castes, and remarriage, where allowed, is restricted to a family member. It is a pathetic condition that young widows like Chuyia, Kalyani, Sashiprova and Saudamini are not allowed to re-marry and are expected to live as an invisible human being.

Hindu social structure is based upon inherent injustice as it permits an aged man to marry a teenage girl and forbids that very girl upon the death of her husband to remarry. Child marriage is not at all to be considered as a marriage and thus parents have to let the child widows free when they are not aware of what widowhood means. Young widows, at times, wishes to remarry and lead a happy life but the society and family members oppose their decision.

In *The Blue-Necked God*, Saudamini wishes to marry her Christian lover. But the society and family members consider it as a transgression. In *Water*, Kalyani desires to marry Narayan, but she too is cursed by the society. Both Saudamini and Kalyani at one point feel dejected and end up their life committing suicide. The condition of widows who wish to remarry is despondent. A widower enjoys his life

through remarriage but a widow's life ends in conundrum. A widower is given freedom to lead a life that he wishes with options of remarriage or even visiting prostitutes.

Sidhwa and Goswami write with a hope that widows who are persecuted by the society in the name of karma may lead a new life. This, however, does not seem possible without any obstacles. Any slight ray of hope for a better life for a widow is cut off by the society. When Saudamini and Kalyani hope for a better life, the society expunges their dreams and ends their life. Therefore, it seems to be an apparent, deliberate, discrimination, disrespect, unjust, impolite, treatment of widows in Indian Hindu communities in spite of the traditional values that emphasize love and care especially towards the vulnerable widows. Some widows are sexually abused by the other male members of their husband's families. Madhumati in *Water* is abused by her brothers-in-law and later she escapes from the brutal men and joins in an ashram for survival.

In general, ashrams are considered to be a place of drudgery for the livelihood of the widows. In holy cities like Vrindavan, many widows throng every year to get salvation through prayers and fast. The old widows like Bua and other radheshyamis are made to beg for their livelihood and they are dragged to a life where they pray to God that their soul may soon rest in peace.

Widows find their direction to the ashrams of holy cities like Vrindavan, Varanasi and Mathura, with a belief that they will be pampered by God and will not die of starvation. Widows in the holy cities hinge on the alms provided by the pilgrims to the widows who sing and beg at temples or another way of survival for them is to sing in the ashrams eight hours a day to get a meal. But the society where widows reside is full of greed.

Many pilgrims and visitors donate money to the widows of bhajan ashrams, but it is not true that there is very little accounting for it and the widows do not gain any profit from it. But the life-styles of the ashram head and accountants have become sumptuous. They swindle the money that is been donated for the ashrams and widows, which is stated in *The Blue Necked God* as: “The various items offered. . . by pilgrims, like clothes, utensils, gold, silver, and precious gems have never been rightly utilized. Instead, they have always been illegally sold at much higher rates” (76). The society which is in the position to save and help widows torments and makes money through them. Many widows in the ashrams are affected by disease. In *The Blue-Necked God*, radheshyamis are diseased by leprosy. When the head of the ashram and accountant find a widow fallen sick, they immediately send them out of the ashram.

Ashram is also a place that pushes widows to practice prostitution and undergo sexual abuse for the sake of financial assistance. The ashram heads, accountants, pimps and paandas drive young widows into prostitution for financial support. The ashram heads and accountants are connected to pimps and paandas, who take young widows to the houses of wealthy patrons. The rich customers are allowed to enjoy with the young widows to earn huge sum. In *Water*, Kalyani is pushed into prostitution by Madhumati at the age of six to generate funds for the ashram. Later she becomes source of income for those in the ashram. Young widows like Kalyani and Sashiprova bear exploitation and assault and experience sexual abuse heartlessly in lieu for their meals.

The society fails to afford security for the widows and the existing social stigma denies widows from seeking help from the society. In *Water*, Chuyia stands helpless when Madhumati sends her along with Gulabi. Being a child, she does not

understand the fact behind Madhumati's action. The society and other widows in the ashram turn numb and fail to save Chuyia from evil hands.

Widows in the holy places are exploited by the priests and paandas. Like butchers scrutinizing animals, men observe widows and choose someone to satisfy their sexual urges. In *Water*, Sadananda takes advantages on young widows; he observes the skin, flesh and beauty of young widows and takes pleasure in it. Widows, who in need of survival and decent funeral, stays with temple priest under the name of service. In *The Blue-Necked God*, Sashiprova stays with a temple priest in order to get rid of the lustful men and also to avoid hunger.

Sashiprova, on the other hand, stays with an impotent priest Alamgarhi. But one day he disrobes her and starts to smell her body like a dog. When he dies, the local priests and friends of Alamgarhi trail her and call her to sleep with them. The male hegemonic society misuses their freedom, calls women for prostitution and relishes in its pleasure.

Prostitution has to be condemned and understood. Men are subjected to blame for driving women into flesh trade. Men show their superiority by indulging in sexual assaults over women. In *Water*, Seth Dwarkanath, Narayan's father, justifies himself by saying, "Our Holy Texts say Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want, and the women they sleep with are blessed" (201). These words expose the double standard and duplicity of the patriarchal society. When Dwarkanath finds his son's relationship with Kalyani, he curses her and calls her a prostitute. In the patriarchal society men use women to fulfill their sexual desire. Later when their need ends, they disparage them.

Sidhwa and Goswami projects the social behaviour, which is farcical as it discriminates against women for bodily violence and relinquishes them to moan with

their pungent experience which gives them a feeling of pain and sense of loss.

Women have to stand against obsolete and stringent traditions. A woman must fight against her conservative marital family which nails her to the shackles of regressive traditions and societal norms. Women in the field of prostitution have to get rid of it by taking up the life of spirituality to live a life of rehabilitation.

The sphere of women's life lies in their home, where they should be liberated to be educated which will help them to lead a better life. Rights of women such as education, property, economic independence, franchise, no legal bar, equal treatment to daughter, wives as equal to husband, women are equals to men, women as individuals, women in economic sphere, women in political arena, women in constructive programme, awareness of rights, women as superior to men and women as Shakti, should be addressed.

Women especially widows are left to suffer silently of the societal stigmas and biases in spite of social awareness and education on rights of women as they are at the receiving end. A woman has the capability to amaze the world, if she is given freedom in the society. The society fails to identify the power and strength of a woman. Women should get liberated from the chains forged by men and men should support them throughout their life.

In order to overcome the financial crisis, the government of India has to help widows by establishing widow's pension schemes, which will help them to improve the standards of their living in the male hegemonic society. By introducing laws like legacy rights, mandatory transmission of inheritance to a widow upon her husband's demise, the registration of properties both in the wife's and husband's names, priority given to widows in property or land distribution formats, enforced registration of marriages, amendment of pension schemes in both administration and value and

positive actions such as inducement schemes to keep the children of widows in school will help every widow to lead a better life independently in the male centric society. Widows are more than prey – they are caretakers, mothers and heads of households. Both widows and their children have to be equally treated and their rights should be protected.

Being a socializer of young children a woman's view about value and the methods of socialization that she adopts are vital factors of the development of social change. If women are allowed to take up responsibility of the society, they will make a better society than men. They will change the futile life of an individual into an admirable one by helping people to understand their role in society. They will teach people to get rid of their fear of religion and customs and will spread the knowledge and importance of life. Thus, educating a girl child will help them awake the consciousness of their condition which will help them to fight for their rights by thinking prudently and to work for their growth and development.

The society has to work on widows' rights in order to make their life better from exclusion to empowerment. At the social level a big transformation should take place to treat women as human beings with feelings, requirements, determinations and potentials. Women too should tap their capabilities ahead of their domestic life to prove their uniqueness. They should not be treated as subordinate or inferior to men but should be treated equal to men. They should play equal role in human growth because they too are a part of the human race.

WORKS CITED

- Baruah, Sudeshna B. "Life is a river of separation: Indira goswami." *Hindustan Times*, 4 Aug. 2007, m.hindustantimes.com/books/life-is-a-river-of-separation-indira-goswami/story-GeTiWNZ1wIILPb7loYKYPO. Accessed 12 Feb. 2019.
- Goswami, Indira. *The Blue-Necked God*, Trans. Gayatri Bhattacharya, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013.
- Hustvedt, Siri. *The Summer Without Men*. Newyork: Picador, 2011. Print, pp.61.
- Kaun, Fauzia. "Plight of Widows in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water*." *Impressions*, vol. 7, no. 2, July 2013, *Impressions*, impressions.org.in/jul13/ar_fkhan.
- M. L, Thiruvani. "Myth and Religion in Indira Goswami's *The Blue-Necked God*." *Impact Journals*, Vol. 6, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 235-36. SSRN, papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3116727.
- Kitchlu, T.N. *Widows in India*. New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House. 1993, pp. 2-5.
- Patil, Godavari D. *Hindu widows: A Study in Deprivation*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing house. 2000, pp. 27-32.
- Mathai M. P. *Mahatma Gandhi's World View*. New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 2000, pp.173.
- Reddy, Adinarayan. *Problems of Widows in India*. New Delhi: Sarup&Sons, 2004, pp.2.
- Sidhwa, Bapsi. *Water: A Novel Based on the Film by Deepa Mehta*. Canada: Milkweed Editions, 2006.
- Subbamma, Malladi. *Women: Tradition and Culture*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1985, pp.4.