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# Exploring Intersectionality in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water*, Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses* and Ismat Chughtai's *The Quilt*

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### Abstract

The works of South Asian writers like Kamila Shamsie, Ismat Chughtai and Bapsi Sidhwa are situated on the cusp between reality and fiction. *Water*, published in 2006, by Bapsi Sidhwa not only injects the suffering of subaltern women in the patriarchal setup into a story, but also brings to surface the unresolved issues of Hindu customs with widowhood and child prostitution in India. Ismat Chughtai's *The Quilt* entails an intersectional framework to explore the severe nature of oppression and discrimination that Muslim women are subjected to due to class relations, sexuality and colonialism. Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses*, through the voice of her protagonist, deals with feminism and resistance and the issue of intersectional gender experiences of which both Aasmani and her mother were a part, in the Pakistani society. Thus, the paper's objective is to explore the complex nature of intersection of religion, political power, gender, class and caste and how women writers have tried to deflate and subvert the major issues through their literary pieces.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, feminism, race, gender, patriarchy, South Asian literature.

### Introduction

The internal struggle at the core of "South Asian Women Writings" post colonialism and post-independence is to accurately portray themselves, their experiences, their preferences-to create something that performs the job of convincing the readers of a woman's endless depth and the pain she fathoms.

South Asian Literature emerged as the model of the empire writing back, dismantling the framework of colonialism. Long awaited political independence came in 1947 where both Pakistan and India broke free from the shackles of British colonial power. It was followed by Sri Lanka's independence in 1948 and Bangladesh becoming an independent state in 1971. The term 'South Asia' emerged to call attention to the Indian subcontinent and the neighboring countries. The countries that constitute South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, or SAARC, are India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan and Maldives. The colonial rule wrecked the national identity of the colonized. The memory of violence was anchored in the minds of the people and the writers and thinkers of these nations gave voice to it. The writers began to knit together the themes of mistrust, conflict and war, the process of severance from the constructed structure of the society and the crisis in self-image in their writings. The grief of partition, lingering memories, political turmoil, immobile identity, conservatism and women being the central victim of the frenzy and hatred is all found in the accounts of writers like Taslima Nasrin,

Bapsi Sidhwa, Prageeta Sharma, Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Ismat Chughtai, Nirad C Chaudhuri, Niaz Zaman and Kamila Shamsie.

"War is gendered" (Goldstein 11). Its nature strikingly manifests in both literature and the experiences of the survivors. It was the tumultuous period of partition and its aftermath in which woman's body was violated in the most mortifying ways. Women from varying socio-cultural identity and socio-political background had different encounters and experiences of the partition. Writers like Bapsi Sidhwa preserved history in her fiction like "The Crow Eater", "Water" and "Ice Candy Man". Ismat Chughtai, an Indian Urdu Novelist, endeavored to ebb away from rigid patriarchal traditions yet managed to maintain the link to the Indian middle-class Muslim culture and indigenous life. The intersection of several aspects of oppression is reproduced in the South Asian writings by the intersection of varied factors like gender, sexuality, religion and society. "The Quilt" by Ismat Chughtai, "Water" by Bapsi Sidhwa and "Broken Verses" by Kamila Shamsie undermine the stereotypical roles and representation of women by supplementing them with ruthless truth and a feeble yet persuasive voice.

**Theory of Intersectionality and its Relevance in Literature**  
Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge define the concept of Intersectionality as a "way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience" (2016:2). The identity of a woman is already compromised by

representing them as an identical group, with no unique perspective or interest. Western Feminism has followed a pattern of not focusing on the experiences of women living in a third world country. With the fragmentation and suffering that an Indian, a Pakistani or a Bangladeshi woman, for that instance, has gone through, they can never be reserved for universal or generalized theory. Their diverse backgrounds, beliefs, religion, caste, ethnicity and sexuality have to be acknowledged first to understand and express their ordeal. These factors have necessitated the inception of an interdisciplinary theory that acclaims both global and local engagement. Intersectionality was formulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," to address how a black woman's identity is insignificant in feminist and antiracist theory and politics and to discuss the marginalization they face within Antidiscrimination law. This theory has seeped into different fields of study, brought various issues on surface and has navigated the national boundaries. Since Intersectionality is rooted in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory, it acts a dimension for healing by giving the marginalized woman the recognition they surely deserve and also establishes itself as a heuristic approach to reintegrate the women to talk about their stories, their homeland.

In 1991, Crenshaw expounded the concept in her work "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color". She puts the theory into play to present the immutable facts regarding the violence against displaced women, women of colour and the ones belonging to socially background backgrounds. She also discusses the omission of their vulnerability and doubly oppressed misery from the single-axis framework of social, feminist and antiracist discourses. Crenshaw has introduced Intersectionality as an instrument to dissolve the problem, stating that ethnic and gender movements should centralize "the life chances and life situations of people who should be cared about without regard to the source of their difficulties" (p. 166). The coinciding of identities should make space for equitable and inclusive policies and discourse. "It seems that placing those who currently are marginalized in the center is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize experiences and undermine potential collective action...."

The goal of this activity should be to facilitate the inclusion of marginalized groups for whom it can be said: "When they enter, we all enter" (p. 167).

Literature brings out the truth in stark relief. Cho *et al* says that first one ought to identify the "structures of power and exclusion" that intersectionality will address. When the structure has been examined, then the intersectional reading of the excluded ones can be analyzed. In English Literature, the West has ensconced itself the central position and The East is labeled as inferior and exotic, creating a huge gap between the two. This division renders the East as not important and brings up the issue of Orientalism which Edward Said has talked about in length. Edward Said coined the term Orientalism, and defined it as "the basic distinction between East and West, as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' and destiny" (p. 10). Since a separate sphere is created for the East, an Intersectional reading of the South Asian writings realizes the conjoining of race, gender and social identity and mends the disconnect between the two spheres. The single-

axis framework leads to fragmentation while Crenshaw's methodology leads to cultural and national amalgamation.

### "Water" by Bapsi Sidhwa

The theory was not fixed in time and soon it was adapted by writers and theorist to draw attention to how social organizations are embedded with power and the role they play in creating marginalization and then, making it conventional. The immigrant or diasporic writers who have experienced the divide exhibit the peculiarities of their cultural identity and unique experiences to change the perception of the West.

Bapsi Sidhwa is one of them, who was born in a Parsi Zoroastrian family in Karachi. She shifted to Mumbai for a few years and then moved to US where she currently resides. Belonging to the minority community of Parsi and describing herself as Punjabi Parsi, she presents a subtle picture of history by digging the issues which have been rejected by the West.

Her novel, *Water*, is an evidence of her propensity for the rich cultural heritage of the Indian subcontinent but she does not confine herself to her religion or race. Her intersectional identity as a member of Parsi minority, a polio-stricken woman and an immigrant writer tends to manifest in her work and create a space to talk about both the victim and the privileged, about different races and their varied experience of discrimination.

Chandra Mohanty refers to Elisabeth Cowie, who suggests that "women as women are not located within family. It is in the family, as an effect of kinship structures, that women as women are constructed, defined within and by the group" (342). To understand how women have been built as subjects, one must be informed about the historical complexities, framework of power and the position of social identities.

The novel, *Water*, is molded on usual structure of a family where the husband, Somnath, coerces his wife Bhagya into marrying their girl child to a middle-aged man of forty years. "You are the wife and daughter of Brahmin Priests, surely you are aware of our traditions. Outside of marriage, the wife has no recognized existence in our tradition". (*Water*: 15) The sentence itself reveals the weight of virtues a girl carries on her shoulders yet her existence is only described in relation to the man in her life. A wife is supposed to surrender to her husband's wishes just like Bhagya did. "It will be as you say- you are her father" (15). Forces of patriarchy result in pressurizing women to give up their own wishes in order to maintain a dignified position in society. Somnath utters that "in the Brahmanical Tradition (...), a woman is recognized as a person only when she is one with her husband. Only then does she become a sumangali, an auspicious woman, and a saubhagyavati, a fortunate woman". (14). The whole concept of viewing a girl child as a burden to get rid of, giving them as a gift to their partner and them occupying a prosperous position in society only after marriage reveals the ingrained beliefs that lead to marginalization of women in every way.

The story reveals the stance of widow in Indian subcontinent and how their strongest parts are called to the fore and fervently tested. Religion and Patriarchy have asserted their control and continuity of the past in the Indian subcontinent to manipulate women. Awareness of the intersection of different forces of power allow one to examine the product of this marginalization and form a new paradigm. Through the narrative, Sidhwa discusses the depravity of lives of girls like Chuyia, Kalyani, Madhumati, Shakuntala and Kunti. A nine-year-old child, Chuyia, is robbed of her playfulness and innocence, by being abandoned at an Ashram, an abode for

widows. Madhumati, the head of the ashram, disciplines other widows and positions them accordingly. Identity is supposed to be infinitely fluid, but in institutions and instances like marriage and widowhood, women are locked in a cage like dimension where they need to participate in their own otherness. Shakuntala, a potent character of the novel, before looking at the canvas of religion fully and demonstrating its contradictions, used to follow what has been written. "She had never questioned the belief in the Dharma Shastra that widowhood was the punishment for a sinful existence in the past. (Water, 66). Kalyani's demise at a tender age is appalling and eye-opening. Shakuntala confides in Narayan the realization she had, "Disguised as religion, it's just about money" (209). The trouble with people is that they abandon rationality to believe in the teachings of priests. All the evil practices stem from greed and gratification. This is reflected from the fact that Madhumati rules the Ashram, for her family donated to a temple.

The identity of widows constantly straddles between being treated as an ill omen and longing for little pleasures of life. Their vulnerability also makes them a prey of prostitution. Rabindra asserts, "The gentry have here an "unnatural concern" for Widows" (Water, 73). Their desires and sexuality become a tool to measure a woman's morality. The elites reduce them to an object for satisfying their lust as "within the patriarchal system, which has prevailed over most of recorded history, there is rape, wife battering, incest, and other structural forms of violence designed to maintain men's domination over women" (Mercanti 165). Kalyani is turned into a prostitute and gets a finer treatment from Madhumati because she provides her money. Madhumati herself was powerless after her husband's death. She was raped by her brothers-in-laws and left to die in the jungle. The brutal past and present financial freedom make Madhumati inhumane but they could not erode the virtuous heart of Kalyani. She goes from being immersed in prostitution to being dwelled in the thought of becoming pious and free. Her firm belief in lord Krishna's teaching to "learn to live like a lotus untouched by the filthy water it grows in" (Water. 131), acts as her anchor. She dreams of marrying Narayan and even manages to escape the prison where Madhumati kept her. Her story ends with her drowning in the Ganga after learning that Narayan's father has been one of her clients. Only death could ease her dejection.

After this incident, Chuyia has been chosen to continue this filthy business. She is drugged and raped and it takes several days for her to return to her senses. She is sent off by Shakuntala in the train of Gandhi's followers. She would discover a newly found freedom and dignified life as "his [Gandhi's] ideology distinguishes certain characters and their behavior to the widow section of the society" (Mander, 9)

Zia Ahmed, a literary scholar, wrote, "Fiction is born out of the society (...), the representation of women emerges as the most significant aspect for the writers of English Fiction as a part of feminism" (90). The story integrates feminism with sexuality, morality and patriarchy to initiate an intersectional reading of a section of Indian society-the widows. Religion, inequality, social status and patriarchal injustice when intertwined make the lives of women adverse. *Water* shows the interaction of power structures to talk about the pangs of widowhood.

**"The Quilt" by Ismat Chughtai and  
"Broken Verses" by Kamila Shamsie**

Khalid Latif said about Ismat, "I had always heard from

people who read Ismat's short stories that she is a woman who took great delight in dominating men. But when I saw her or the first time, I felt that she was a sensitive, warm-hearted person, a flower (Mahfil, 189).

Chughtai was a revelation as a novelist and short-story writer. Her work speaks to the reader's inner-self and leaves an impact for eternity. Her short story, "Lihaaf" or "The Quilt" published in 1942, is incorporated with the moments of courageous sexual realization and women liberation when it was unimaginable for women to communicate their own experiences. It calls for the exploration of multiple angles of domination in which women are subjugated. The writer presents an anatomy of virtue which had become a social taboo in colonial and post-colonial India.

Archbishop Fulton Sheen wrote, "To a great extent the level of any civilization is the level of its womanhood. When a man loves a woman, he has to become worthy of her. The higher her virtue, the more noble her character, the more devoted she is to truth, justice, goodness, the more a man has to aspire to be worthy of her. The history of civilization could actually be written in terms of the level of its women" (Sheen, *Life Is worth Living*). Women have been expected to be noble since time immemorial but colonization instilled the fear of losing one's culture and its intricacies amongst the colonized which leads to idealization of women as being the bearer and preserver of culture. Where there is idealization, there is ought to be invasion of free will.

Female desire and emancipation were such untouched concepts to which Ismat opened the door. Begum Jaan is a character who is described to be an aristocrat, married to her husband who is oblivious to her companionship. She is surrounded by all his possessions but a deep sense of loneliness and lack of love fill her heart. Nawab, her husband, was righteous in conduct but had a peculiar habit of "keeping an open house for students—young, fair and slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him" (5). She is fragile with burning desires of youth that are satiated with the entry of her maid, Rabbo. She is narrated to be always massaging Begum Jaan with a plethora of sexual connotations.

The image of a wife being imprisoned in her own house reveals the patriarchal setup of marriage. The primary duty of the wife was to look after the house, tend to her family and live a dull life. Even the books she was exposed to were for the education of her children. In the story, Nawab confines her in the designated household. There could be an underlying fear behind this, for allowing her to go outside may give her wings. Possessing the wife like a commodity satisfies and strengthens his manliness and vigour. Women disrupt "hegemonic gendered scripts by exhibiting mastery of sexual skills, and actively engage in seeking, giving and receiving sexual pleasure" (Mudaly 45). Begum Jaan does not curb her impulses, she refuses the authority and emerges as an unfettered woman who expresses her queerness and sexuality. Ismat faced a trial for this story that was labeled as blasphemous. In her exceptional piece of work, she brings up the theme of restrained sexual fancy and desires, homosexuality and unstrained expression. Quilt or Lihaaf becomes a metaphor for women homosexuality. The story also indicates Nawab's interest in young boys but is deliberately not taken into consideration at all to suggest that men's free will is not questioned often. The writer challenges the male ego and their masculinity by giving an account of Begum Jaan's desperation and unfulfilled carnal pleasures. The story also gives voice to the sexual assault faced by the young child narrator who is too innocent to understand the



relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbo. The exploitation of children was not a conventional topic for the writers of colonial and postcolonial India. The trauma of the abuse is ingrained in her so much that even a shadow of guilt is enough to conjure up the most horrifying images in her mind. "My mind begins a mad race into the dark crevasses of the past; memories come flooding in" (The Quilt, 5).

Thus, the text reveals the multiple forms of discrimination a Muslim woman faced in the restrictive household. Their religion and gender fabricate them as an object to be kept inside the home. The intersectional framework uses Patriarchy, Muslim's religious beliefs, institution of wedding and heterosexuality to resist the power and forge a way for the women to own their sexuality, queerness and freedom. Besides this obvious revelation, about how repression leads to a rebellion of the wildest sort, it is clear that marriage must be rethought and reconsidered for its own sake. A woman is not merely a material being made for marital pursuit and her identity is not created to be reduced to the crumbs of universal suppression.

Kamila Shamsie, a Pakistani British female, is "a novelist to reckon with and to look forward to" ("In the City of Storytellers" The New Indian Express). Through her "Broken Verses" she delves into the regressive and fundamentalist atmosphere of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Pakistan that suffocates women. Her introspective narrative not only presents the psyche and lives of various women but also brings up the issue of their suppression resulting from intersection of various factors. She expresses the quandary of well-educated women who know that there is a world that exists outside restrictions of household, but are unable to experience it.

In the novel, Samina Akram is an activist who disappears after the heinous murder of the Poet, her beloved. The involvement of government in his killing hints at the intersection of history and political power. Aasmani is the daughter of Samina who is enraged by the sudden desertion of her mother. The strife between fundamentalist and democratic ideologies in Pakistan is at the heart of the piece.

Chandra Mohanty Talpade in her essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", deconstructs the stereotype of a "Third World Women" and asserts the need to historicize all analyses of women's oppression. (335). No one force dominates this gender but there are many economic, religious and political powers that are involved in the oppression of women. This is what Shamsie does: she captures various factors silencing and stifling the women. Samina is a "fiercely independent woman" (87) whose zeal captivates the interest of the progressive, anti-government poet, Omi. Western thought process inspired her to have an affair with him in the most daring way. Her lover "made her a figure of rebellion, of salvation, she played into it" (Broken Verses, 88). She becomes an epitome of the freedom desired by literate women by delivering speeches at girls' colleges and being a part of panel discussions on women empowerment. At first, she is swayed by being the muse of a famous poet but the passion that ran through her veins wanted to create "an identity that wasn't caught up in his shadow" (Broken Verses, 88). She marries someone in haste just to take control of her life and breaks it off in merely four months. She lives near her lover after the separation from her husband. She refuses to adhere to any kind of norms nor get trapped in societal cages. She forges her own identity, actively protests for the upliftment of lower-class women during the 1970s and 80s Pakistan and does not even let her relationship stand in her way. In the words of her daughter

1980s "was all prison, protest and exile and upheaval".

Aasmani is the protagonist and the story is about loss, absence, memory and the quest for answers. Working at the first Independent TV station of Pakistan, she digs up the past trying to find her identity. This journey confronts her with the anger built up inside her concerning the disappearance of her mother and the contemporary political scenario. The letters she starts receiving in a secret code alter the course of her life completely. The poet used to write letters in a secret code to her mother. This realization instills a new found hope in her that if the poet is still alive, her mother could also be somewhere. She immerses herself on activism. She questions "How could a government be stupid enough to kill him while everyone knew he was working on a collection of political poems?" (161).

Rigorous reading of the note and letters, meetings with the Poet's friends, the desperation all lead her to finally become aware of her trauma, facilitate the escape of the poet Inayat who was held captive in Afghanistan and the finally accept the death of her mother after fourteen years. But her curiosity carries the novel forward by unfolding it backwards to talk about the social life of Pakistan after partition, the military's dictate and the dire state of women under the rule of Hudood. "It is true that in concrete battles, tyrants may have an advantage in terms of tactics, weapons, and ruthlessness." ("306) People like Omi and Samina choose to resist the rule through a different means. "Tyranny must be forced to defend itself through language. Weaken it through public opinion, Supreme Court rulings, debates, and subversive curriculum. Take control of the media, of the printing presses and newspapers, of pirate radio channels, of spreading the word." (306) she decides to devote herself to freedom struggle and justice as she realizes the legacy of her mother and the absolute necessity to continue it.

The story encapsulates the discord between ordinary the men and women and the militant tyranny. The dismal state of the people makes them strive for liberation. Samina is the voice of a commoner who opposes the rule, the societal prejudices, the religious practices like Purdah and other Islamic laws. It also captures the anguish a woman bears when she loses her lover, in the case of Samina and when she is abandoned by her mother, in the case of Aasmani. Both are resilient, they ask questions and they rebel but many factors stop them from achieving the freedom they deserve. The factors that have been blindly enmeshed in the web of power and propaganda rather than created by knowledge or critical thought. The novel not only gives the evidence of the state of women suppressed under Hudood laws during General Zia's regime but also stretches itself to women activism and the consequences of poets, writers and media team who do not adhere to the authority. Religious extremism, political regime, Islamic laws, trauma of segregation and separation, all the other angles intersect together and the women are left with no choice but to revolt against them or deal with them.

## Conclusion

Change requires awareness of the old and embracing of the emerging. Intersectionality, propounded by Kimberlé Crenshaw, has intricately woven itself in the late twentieth and twenty first century's literature and theory. It gives the space to examine co-existing factors that cast a dent in the lives and identity of subjugated women of different race, religion, ethnicity, class or geographical area. Leslie McCall highlights the importance of this theory, calling it "...the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in

conjunction with related fields, has made so far” (2005). It has contributed in subverting the long-standing binary status and has also provided a space for varied identities of gender and race. The clear exercise of examining South Asian texts like Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Water*, Ismat Chughtai’s *The Quilt* and Kamila Shamsie’s *Broken Verses* ends with the revelation of a never-ending list of forces that govern women’s life. A widow has to serve penance even if she is a child due to her religion or caste or creed or societal pressure. A woman is married off as if she is a burden and is expected to emanate all the virtues in any given circumstance. Her desires have no weightage in the patriarchal structure of the place she takes birth in. Her voice is erased in larger contexts despite her relentless effort to resist someone’s domination. All of this is well-established and common in day-to-day life. The intersectional experience gives birth to a complex identity, their multi-layered aspect of discrimination gives them a powerful voice which they are often deprived of. Intersectionality is like a device to view various angles of suppression. A single-axis framework of feminism could not explain every individual’s misery. A tool was needed to bring forth the hidden and less famous dimensions of feminism in order to initiate transformation. Intersectionality is that tool which can be applied in South Asian writings to examine and move the fixed and untouched structures of power

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