

**Difference, Sisterhood & Others:  
Postcolonialism & Recuperation of Silences in Sidhwa's "Water"**

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*Abstract: The recuperative paradigm has acquired tremendous significance in recent times to comprehend the sameness-alterity debate raging fiercely in feminist circles due to the advent of Postcolonialism. Feminism, with its characteristic emphasis on unearthing/recuperating the unnatural silences of women, hinges on the question whose voice will be recuperated by whom because the Postcolonial studies have shattered the white feminism's myth of homogenous, unified sisterly groups across cultures. But the Postcolonial emphasis on difference also needs to acknowledge and assimilate the differences that exist within same cultural community of 'homogenous' sisters as well. For this purpose, this study explores Sidhwa's presentation of 'others' in her work "Water" who, ironically, exist, not on the other side of racial/cultural/gender binary, rather the 'others' who belong to the same race, the same sisterly group. Thus Sidhwa appropriates and, eventually, deconstructs the Western feminism's notion of Gynocriticism that privileges the realm of maternal as opposed to the paternal realm and Rymond's (2001) notion of "Gyn/affection" which is premised upon universal sisterly notions of ethic of care and empowerment. Sidhwa, for this purpose, inculcates the emotion of envy into Postcolonial feminism's discourses. The sisterly, feminist recuperative myth that only women can and do recuperate each other's voice stands exposed when it is intersected with the Postcolonial notion of 'others' who exist within the same community/gender/race. Thus Sidhwa diverges from the Western hegemonic notion of universal sisterhood and propounds/constructs her own notion of sisterhood that venerates rather than assimilates differences among sisters.*

*Key-words: Recuperation, Others, Gynocriticism, Gyn/affection, Alterity/difference, Homogenous sisterhood.*

In the herstory of feminist scholarship, recuperation refers to delineating the unnatural silences characteristic of all creative endeavour in general and of women's writing in particular. It involves the recovering of lost, marginalized female voices, in other words, the ability to exchange experiences on the part of marginalized women in both the private and the public spheres. (Kaplan 1996) The heroic task of recovering the lost, marginalized voices is incomplete without the presence of ideal listeners because discourse/narration is "based on the desire to be heard, recognized, and listened to" as Peter Brooks (1985) puts it. Thus recuperation entails not

merely the politics of voice, the mere act of speaking on part of the relatively disempowered; rather it entails, more significantly, the act of listening on part of the relatively empowered or the search for a listener capable of bringing about transformation in response to the other's act of speaking.

In this context, this paper explores the relevance of recuperative paradigm under the influence of postcolonial studies that have problematized and de-sanctified the unified notions of self-other, us-them, centre-margin. The very notion of 'others' who exist on the other side of gender/racial/cultural binary have been put under scrutiny by writers like Bapsi Sidhwa who turn their gaze inward and look at the multi-faceted hegemonic structures that exist in the so-called homogenous, monolith communities occupying the so-called margins. For this purpose, this paper utilizes the Lacanian notion of other, particularly the Lacanian little other that Homer (2005) describes as the imaginary other. This Lacanian notion has been deemed significant as it describes amply the internalization of whole, unified or coherent egos for the sake of completion and coherence by the self. The notion of other as the lack, the object that essentializes and completes the image of self, has been utilized in this context to contemplate the presence of others within the same sisterly communities.

The very notion of recuperation is tied closely to the theoretical construct of Gynocriticism that venerates the essential feminine attributes of care, nurture, selfless devotion, unified resistance to oppression based on the ethos of motherhood/sisterhood, the treasuring and privileging of the realm of maternal as opposed to the paternal realm. This Western, normative (from the white feminists' perspective) notion of gynocriticism implies a static, fixed category of 'women' where every woman has the right to speak about and speak on behalf of every woman irrespective of the differences that reside in the de-legitimized, disempowered positionings of women across the globe. Sidhwa, in her work "Water", has challenged this very theoretical standpoint of Western feminists by assuming the right and responsibility to speak about women of colour and on behalf of women of colour. In her work "Water", she has presented a community of women who belong to the same race, occupying the same marginalized, disempowered existence/positioning in society i.e. widows relegated to a discarded realm, but the question that assumes significance is that does this similarity in social positioning and location lead to empowered listening among this community of widows or not? Do these women, the sisterly community of widows, 'listen' to each other or not? And do the hegemonic structures/binaries that exist within the same culture, within the same gender hinder the very act of recuperation or not? And, most importantly, if these structures do hinder or obstruct empowerment, liberation, enlightenment for marginalized women then the very notions of us-them, self-other need to be perceived anew, penetrated anew and defined anew.

This paper looks at the sisterly relationships depicted by Sidhwa in her work "Water" to probe the recuperative practices preferred by the writer. Sidhwa, in "Water", has presented a community of women which is 'supposedly' based on the sisterly notions of ethic of care, a

community where women nurture each other and present a unified front against oppression as Madhumati, the matron of ashram where all widows reside, puts it:

In our shared grief, we're all sisters here, and this ashram  
is our only refuge. (42)

The sisterly community of widows depicted by Sidhwa apparently reinforces the Gynocentric belief in Pre-Oedipal Maternal realm which the traditional moral theory stigmatizes as “pre-moral” as Carol Gilligan (1981) puts it. This Pre-Oedipal maternal realm, gynocentrics believe, is the feminine realm of responsibility and care as opposed to the paternal realm of rights and justice. But Sidhwa diverges from this Western feminist notion by enunciating her own version of sisterhood that questions the Gynocentric essentialization/stereotyping of femininity in the name of feminist projects of liberation and empowerment. Through the depiction of characters like Madhumati and Kunti, Sidhwa questions the validity and relevance of Western epistemological constructs in contexts where needs and desires, agency and empowerment have very different meanings for women. In this respect, the characters of Bua, Madhumati, Kalyani and Chuyia are extremely relevant.

Sidhwa has questioned the all-pervasive gynocentric notion of ethic of care through the communicative exchange between Bua and Chuyia in her work “Water”. Bua epitomizes the notion of self-talk as she is the frail widow in the ashram whose voice is relegated to the realm of muttering/self-talk by the other widows. Here I have utilized Goffman's (1981) notion of self-talk propounded in his work “Forms of Talk”. Goffman as cited in Kaplan (1996) describes self-talk as “self-effacing, humiliating, or damaging to one's social standing (13).” He believes that self-talk can take many forms including muttering, girl talk or even gossips. These forms serve to distort the social standing of the speaker by exhibiting the speaker's inability to engage the listeners in transformative communicative exchange:

A summons to talk that is openly snubbed can leave us feeling that we have been caught engaging in something like talking to ourselves. (Goffman as cited in Kaplan 1996: 13)

And it is not merely the absence of listeners that leads to self-talk, rather a dialogic exchange with someone from an inferior positioning in society like the speaker can also render the speaker and listener guilty of self-talk. Thus women through an inter-subjective exchange with someone like themselves can be labeled as self-talkers. And it is not only men who view women's talk in this belittling manner, rather women also perceive and label communicative exchange with each other in this disparaging manner. This perception of girl-talk as a hindrance to legitimate intersubjective exchange by men as well as by women will be contested through an analysis of Chuyia's listening to Bua's talk.

Bua, in Sidhwa's "Water", is deemed guilty of self-talk by the other widows living in the ashram; she is deemed guilty of muttering which results in her devalued positioning in the community of widows. Here, Sidhwa exposes the silencing that devalues the subject implicit within a sisterly community which should be, supposedly, based on empowered listening. She is the other whose devalued existence gives a unified meaning to the other widows' existence in the ashram. Her muttering or self-talk enhances the other widows' ability to enter into intersubjective meaningful dialogic exchange. Thus through her lack, Bua feeds and completes the egos of other widows who constitute the self, the 'us' in this context. Her desire for "laddoo" (46), which we interpret as the desire for a competent, transformational listener, is interpreted by all widows as mere muttering that deserves no response from their side.

*"The other widows remained silent as Bua launched into her favourite story, the detailed description of all the glorious sweets served at her wedding: 'I had never seen a display like that before...I was so fascinated...plump, juicy rasgullas, piping hot gulab jamuns, kaju barfi, yellow laddoos dripping in ghee (83).'"*  
[Italics mine]

The other widows, through their silence, negatively associate Bua's desire for "laddoo" as muttering or self-talk and it is due to this negative association and her delegitimized positioning among her symbolic sisters, that Bua is forced to resort to any listener, even to a child like Chuyia, so as not to be transformed into a self-talker.

*Ambling back into the courtyard, Chuyia came upon Patirajji [Bua], sitting on the veranda with back to the pillar. The old widow greeted her with a twinkle in her eyes, and Chuyia got the impression that she had been waiting for her. (44-45)* [Italics mine]

It is, indeed, Chuyia who listens to Bua's desire to enter into inter-subjective redeeming communicative exchange. Chuyia performs this task by listening to the tales of Bua's past life: "delighted by the presence of this unexpected night companion she could talk to, Bua soon began reminiscing about her life in village and the mischief she and her sisters would cook up at the village pond." (55) Bua narrates her childhood tales, the details of her wedding ceremony especially the "sweets" (56) and Chuyia acts as Bua's appropriate listener when she 'listens' to Bua's desire for 'laddoo' which is the first demand on her 'listening' made by Bua.

'Do you have laddoo?' she [Bua] whispered hopefully.

Chuyia shook her head, 'No.'

'Awake or asleep, even in my dreams, all I see are sweets,' Bua sighed wistfully. (46)

And it is this desire for sweets that renders suspect Bua's very subjectivity. It makes other widows negatively associate her talk to muttering or a state of lunacy as only "lunatics and

children talk to themselves.” (Goffman as cited in Kaplan 1996, 13) But it is Chuyia who positively associates Bua’s talk as the expression of Bua’s desire for laddoo creates “a surge of affection” (46) for Bua in Chuyia rather than the state of indifference or apathy as in the other widows.

Thus the gynocentric myth that sisterly relationships are nourished and nurtured on an ethic of care and empowered listening is shattered and exposed by Sidhwa through Bua’s character. Bua’s voice is not recuperated by her sisters; it is rather a child i.e. Chuyia who ‘listens’ to her desire to enter into redeeming transformative communicative exchange and thereby redeem her social standing within the sisterly community she inhabits. Thus Sidhwa appropriates the Western feminism’s myth of third world woman as a unified site of resistance. The apathy and (in)differences supposedly prevalent only in the discourse of white feminists are also evident in the discourses of women of colour; Sidhwa does not try to curb these (in)differences in the name of united resistance to male hegemony or Western epistemic dominance; she rather venerates these (in)differences to arrive at a better understanding of the notions of agency and empowerment for the third world women.

The silencing of women done by women belonging to the same sisterly group is made again evident by Sidhwa through her presentation of Kalyani’s speechless encounter with a married woman who invalidates Kalyani’s being by measuring her against the patriarchal cultural norms, against the appropriate code of conduct required of a widow. Here, again, Kalyani’s devalued existence serves to complete the ego, the image of the married woman through contrast. The mere glare of that woman, with “a mangalsutra that cut into her neck and the outsized bindi blazing between her brows” (59) that proclaimed her marital status, makes Kalyani, as Sidhwa puts it, “stop mid-sentence.” (58) The mere glare of that woman turns Kalyani into a mere listener with no voice of her own. The woman then embarks on her monologue with no possibility of it being transformed into a dialogue in a non-coercive speech situation.

‘What filth!’ she hissed, an ugly expression distorting her  
harsh features, ‘You have no shame.’ ... ‘You have no morals!  
You are a widow, and yet you run around like you are  
an unmarried girl.’ (59)

Thus rather than white feminists or masculinists, it is the women belonging to the same race, the same sisterly group who discard the possibility of recuperation for their own sisters. It essentializes the need that Postcolonial structuralism that makes us, the women of colour, search for others only among the centralized, Western community, needs to be re-defined and brought within the realm of post-structuralist plurality and ambivalence that resides at the heart of postmodern discourses.

The recuperative paradigm also needs to incorporate the emotion of envy in postcolonial feminism’s discourses. The sisterhood envisioned by Sidhwa in “Water” assimilates the emotion

of envy and thereby necessitates the need to inculcate and recognize this emotion as part of feminist discourses as well. This task has been accomplished by Sidhwa mainly in relation to the characters of Kalyani and Kunti. The emotion of envy differs from jealousy as it is a two-person structure unlike jealousy which is a three-person structure; it is concerned with being, not having. Sidhwa, in "Water", also deconstructs and exposes Raymond's notion of "Gyn/affection. Raymond, in her book "A Passion for Friends" (2001), coins the term "Gyn/affection" to describe the "liberating potential of Gyn/affection where women turn to their Selves and others like their Selves for empowerment," (13) for the power of "the female Self in affinity with others like her Self--her sisters." (13) Sidhwa depicts a community of widows, who after their entry into the symbolic order through heterosexual relationships, namely their marriages, again revert to pre-Oedipal phase which is the maternal realm and can be perceived as the desire for the Law-of-the-Mother as opposed to the Oedipal phase which is the paternal realm, the realm dominated by the Law-of-the-Father. But this desire for the maternal symbolic order overlooks the working of envy. The community of widows depicted by Sidhwa hints at a desire for a maternal symbolic order where the Law-of-the-Father will possibly be replaced by the Law-of-the-Mother but this desire for matriarchy needs to take into account the hegemonic structures that in all probability will reside in the ambivalent and dual nature of this matriarchal Law--not only in the highly ambivalent relation of (m)other but also in the form of competitive struggles in the matriarchal domain where the oedipal struggles between men will be replaced by the struggles based on envy between women.

Sidhwa has depicted the politics of envy in her work "Water", mainly, in relation to the character of Kalyani. The widows in "Water" believe that Kalyani lives a life of unfettered, privileged existence. As a young, "stunningly beautiful (50)" widow whose head is not shaven---"a coil of dark hair knotted at the back framed the bright oval of her face, and a tail from the knot fell to her waist" (50-51)---she stands in sharp contrast with the other widows living in the ashram who "with their shaved heads and long, stern faces" (40) look like men. Moreover, Kalyani is still in a capacity to exercise her sexuality, albeit through prostitution, but she is still 'desirable'. She seems to be, in the eyes of other widows like Kunti, still in possession of freedom, sexuality, in short, relishing an existence which is not that much constrained by the patriarchal laws as the existence of other widows living in the ashram. In contrast to her, the other widows present a sorry figure:

Wraith-like figures in white saris, their every movement seemed to be an apology for their continued existence. They were unadorned except for the two-pronged ash smears that marked them as devotees of Lord Karishna." (40)

The origin or source of envy is always unequal distribution of power. In kalyani's case, it is the unequal distribution of unfettered existence which breeds envy. Kalyani, unlike the other widows who have no room of their own, has her own room in the ashram although a small one; she, among all the widows, is the one who gets new saris quite often; moreover, she is coveted and

especially taken care of by Madhumati, the matron of the ashram, while Madhumati misbehaves with the other widows and insults them. This difference in power and status breeds envy. As a result, she is segregated by the other widows who do not even deign to eat their food with her, thinking that it would pollute them. As in response to Chuyia's query "where is Kalyani?" at lunch time, Kunti replies:

'Eating with Kalyani would pollute our food,' she said with a snooty edge of malice in her voice. (82)

The above-quoted words by Kunti express a thwarted desire and frustration on her part. As envy is concerned with being and not having so when Kunti fails to be Kalyani, to live an unfettered existence as she deems Kalyani to be relishing, then she tries to disparage her and belittle her existence in the eyes of other widows. To lessen the pain of failure to be Kalyani, Kunti strives to, as Samuel Johnson (1969) says, "alleviate the sense of disparity by lessening the other." (197) This effort to lessen the other is also evident when Kunti tries to dissuade Shakuntala from giving Kalyani the freedom to re-marry by unlocking her room and letting her leave the ashram:

Kunti placed a hand on Shakuntala's shoulder and pleaded, 'Don't open the door, didi. Please, didi.' (160)

And when Kalyani leaves the ashram to get married to Narayan, Kunti's rage is quite palpable:

Kunti stood with her wiry arms crossed in front of her, every muscle in her body tight with hostility towards Kalyani. (161)

But, on the other hand, the belief that the other is in possession of something that the self lacks is also an illusion, a myth. Kalyani also, rather than living a life of an unfettered existence, is all the more exploited and restrained because of her "stunning beauty." (50) It is evident from the fact that she is forced to prostitute herself, and, ultimately, she had to sacrifice her life to escape the verdict society passes over her as a fallen woman. Here, the maternal symbolic fails to protect her and come to her aid. Before committing suicide, she comes to Madhumati for help but instead of helping her out in accordance to Raymond's notion of 'Gyn/affection', where women turn to others with selves like their own for empowerment, she is brutally discarded by her:

Had she expected some consideration from Madhumati? Some sort of healing shelter in which to lick her wounds before she could decide what to do? Despite knowing Madhumati as well as she did, she stupidly had...She was like an animal caught in a snare. (177)

The maternal symbolic that should have served as the Beauvoirian (1949) "behind the scenes" (604) site to prepare women for participation in society abandons her to be prostituted and then, finally, to be devoured by the patriarchal norms of society. Thus envy deconstructs the sisterly myth of ethic of care and Gyn/affection.

Thus it can be said that Sidhwa deconstructs white feminism's notion of recuperation that women can and always do recuperate each other's voices. Through the notion of self-talk and the

emotion of envy she seems to question the Western assumption of women of colour as a unified site of resistance against a unified centre i.e. western epistemic hegemony. The sisterly recuperative myth that only women can and do recuperate each other's voice stands exposed as Kalyani's voice is silenced by her symbolic sisters' refusal to listen to her. Thus Sidhwa highlights the ambivalence inherent in the Western recuperative notion and asserts the need to modify it to include the role of silencing done by women of women's voices. She problematizes the Western definitions of self-other, us-them, center-margin to treasure the (in)differences existing among women of colour. She also registers her skepticism with regard to a possible matriachal hegemonic domain through the inculcation of the emotion of envy in the feminist discourses. Thus she discards the possibility of universal sisterly homogenous groups that disregard the (in)differences among themselves only to offer a unified front against Western imperialism. Only after an understanding and acceptance of (in)differences does recuperation, in this era of postcolonialism, stand a chance to be 'recuperated'.

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