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**Social Stigma and Mental Health-Seeking Behaviour among Widowed Women in Pakistan: A Qualitative Study with Feminist Literary Analysis of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water***



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**Abstract**

This study examines the impact of social stigma on the mental health-seeking behaviour of widowed women in Pakistan, with a particular focus on depression, anxiety, and related psychosocial challenges. The research also explores the representation of widowhood, gendered oppression, and patriarchal structures in Sidhwa's novel *Water*, using it as a literary lens to contextualize lived experiences of widowed women. Employing a qualitative research design, the study integrates primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15–18 widowed Pakistani women aged between 18 and 49 years, selected through purposive sampling. Secondary data included the novel *Water* along with relevant scholarly literature. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's framework, was used to identify recurring patterns and construct meaningful themes from the data. The findings reveal that widowed women frequently experience depression, anxiety, social isolation, and reduced self-esteem, largely due to stigma, cultural expectations, and limited awareness of mental health services. Key barriers to seeking psychological help include financial constraints, family disapproval, cultural taboos, and fear of social labelling. However, factors such as family support, accessibility of services, confidentiality, and affordability were found to encourage help-seeking behaviour. The study further identifies six major themes: perceptions of mental health services, lived experiences, socio-cultural influences, barriers, suggestions for improvement, and facilitators of help-seeking. In addition, a feminist analysis of *Water* demonstrates how widows in pre-independence India are portrayed as marginalized and exploited under rigid patriarchal and religious structures. The novel reinforces the persistence of gender inequality across historical and contemporary contexts. Overall, the study concludes that widowhood stigma significantly shapes women's psychological well-being and access to mental health care, highlighting the need for culturally responsive interventions, awareness campaigns, and improved mental health infrastructure in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Widowhood, Social Stigma, Mental Health-Seeking Behaviour, Feminist Analysis, Sidhwa's *Water*, Pakistan

**Background of the Study**

Sidhwa's (1938) novel, *Water* describes the several hardships that widows face in Indian culture. This novel depicts the way widows were perceived in the traditional Indian culture. In ancient India, widows faced extreme levels of discrimination and were often dehumanized by the society. Throughout the history of Hindu society, the standards and expectations for widows have been marked by practices such as "widow husband or sati." During the British reign, practices such as sati were outlawed. In India, widow remarriage was made legal by the British in the year 1856. Since India gained its freedom in 1947, it has been almost a century and a half. The liberalization of our economy and increased globalization has both had an effect on our basic cultural structure. Widows continue to face and they are labelled with a variety of societal taboos which teaches them to be disciplined and self-denying. Young widows are frequently subjected to sexual exploitation in certain parts of the world. Widows in their later years often beg for alms outside of temples or on busy city streets.

Widows are frequently excluded from society and forced into isolation via the use of various traditions and rituals. Widows that have been labeled as "unfriendly" are frequently segregated. Sidhwa brought up a very crucial point on the predicament of widows in the 1930s and the effect that Gandhi had on society. In addition, her novel discusses the roles that women played in the civil rights movement. This conflict was on a scale that had never been seen before. Gandhi was able to take conventional beliefs and symbols and transform them into a wellspring

of encouragement and power for women. Women were able to better understand their rights as a result of Gandhi's influence. Despite the fact that the nationalist struggle made it possible for women to access the public arena, the situation did not fundamentally alter itself as the indomitable spirit of Chuya refuses to be enslaved by the oppressive constraints of a monolithic patriarchal system. This poses a significant threat to the traditions upheld by undemocratic societies and also presents a significant challenge to undemocratic traditions.

Women have traditionally been more susceptible to being devalued than men due to various deviant symptoms, including widowhood (Schur, 1984; Yodanis, 2005). There is a dearth of studies on the impact of widowhood on developing and young adult women (EYAs) between the ages of 20 and 30, particularly regarding the stigma associated with divorce. Given that stigma is connected with negative outcomes such as shame, embarrassment, self-esteem issues, isolation and access to psychological care (Scambler, 1998: 2004), this gap is valid in the literature. Although Gerstel (1987) suggested that the stigma connected with widowhood may play a significant role in creating identity, research on stigma and widowhood has ground to a halt during the past two decades. It is unknown whether the negative effects of the stigma associated with widowhood continued.

The primary reason for conducting this research was to answer the question of whether or not these impacts have a detrimental impact on the lives of EYA women and, if they do, how these effects may manifest in women during the process of personal growth and consolidation. It is uncertain how the social stigma attached to getting a widowhood impacts and affects EYA women, who build the foundation for future professional and personal choices. Because studies on stigma in this demography have mostly remained stagnant, this study is structured around the following question: If it is the case that women are widow between the ages of 20 and 30 face stigma as a result of their status as divorcees, then what does that stigma look like?

### **Defining Stigma**

Social scientists are interested in the effects of stigma on populations and environments since it is a multifaceted phenomenon (Corrigan, 2014; Goldberg and Smith, 2011; Sedlovskaya et al., 2013). Stigma was defined by King (2008, p. 58) as a "condition for withholding complete social acceptance". Access to resources and support, assets linked with successful adaptation, are obstructed when there is a stigma (Link and Phelan, 2001). According to Ungar (2011), the likelihood that a person would feel stress, increases in proportion to the degree to which they are skillful in providing resources such as emotional and material support and financial security. Suppose the cultural images connected with the group in question are full of negative stereotypes and preconceived beliefs. In that case, the group members may experience low self-esteem and self-efficacy, and low confidence, and even discrimination, as described by Corrigan and Kleinlein (2005). People subjected to stigma are less likely to use available mental health services (Vogel et al., 2010).

Open prejudice is one way that stigma can be experienced, but it can also be felt on the inside (Vogel et al., 2013). It is imperative that the influence of stigma as expressed in social and structural models needs to be considered. Not only does stigma take the form of an attack on the individual, but it can also be seen in how a person views their position in the larger society. According to the findings of Link and Phelan (2001, p. 367), "stigma consists of components of labeling, stereotyping, division, loss of status, and discrimination that coexist within conditions of power that allow these processes to emerge."

Corrigan (2014) differentiated societal stigma from the individual's own internalized stigma and uncovered the three primary aspects of stigma: discrimination, stereotypes, and preconceived notions. Stereotypes are educational structures that generally lead to categorization in the context of social stigma, as well as influence and expectations endorsed by the vast majority of members of the social group. Even though people may be aware of the preconceptions connected with a certain group, they may nevertheless believe that the stereotypes are not valid. Discrimination is a

of negative beliefs about an identified group.

### **Widowhood and Stigma**

Even in cases where young children are involved, Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) found that widowhood has become an acceptable choice over the past four decades. Long-term patterns in the perception of various choices in family and personal life, such as attitudes toward sexual roles, marriage, premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and childlessness, have been observed by researchers. Studies have shown that widowhood is more noticeable, yet, the stigma attached to widowhood has a vital influence on the perspective of the other, therefore overshadowing other traits of the individual that define them (Gerstel, 1987). The stigmatization of others who are different from oneself is a prerequisite for the dissolution of relationships based on stigma. This typically results in a fall in a person's reputation and reduces a person's perception of their self-worth (Vogel et al., 2013).

According to Goffman (1963, p. 173), "widows are seen as fewer desirable species in our minds, they have evolved from a whole and ordinary person into polluted and facilitated person". Arditti and Lopez (2005) on the other hand, studied the perceptions of widow women by Puerto Rican and Dominican women and found that the views expressed were polarized. Widow women were perceived as either independent or successful, or failed and excluded from society. In addition, a poll conducted by Cherlin et al. (2008) on the perspectives of low-income women about widowhood revealed that one in four participants agreed with the proposition that widowhood should be regarded as a source of shame for women.

It is uncertain whether the stigma connected with widowhood is still a relevant cultural phenomenon, and if it is, what such a stigma would look like in today's society. This study is based by focusing on the effects of stigma in various settings, such as the workplace, the home, romantic relationships, and social settings. In Pakistan, widows are subjected to higher levels of stress than married women. This stress manifests itself in the form of emotional disturbances, dismissals, emotional events, severe physical illness, and problems with both themselves and their godly families (Donnelly & Finkelhor, 2002). After going through a divorce, most women report feelings of rejection, stroke, guilt, shame, anger, anxiousness, and resentment. Women who have been through a widowhood and are struggling financially, face a significant challenge regarding raising their children and fulfilling their fundamental requirements, such as meal, clothes, tuition, and the expense of maintaining their home. Every one of these women's issues is connected to issues that the child may face in the future, whether psychological, social, physical, or behavioural (Kotwal and Prabhakar, 2009). According to Gilman and Schneider and Shulak (2005), the detrimental effects of widowhood are more detrimental to women than to men. This is because women are typically responsible for childcare, and as a result, women face more difficulties in life as well as financial difficulties. In addition, after a widowhood in Pakistan, women experience more emotional difficulties than men because they are typically illegitimate and unable to earn money for their children. Men, on the other hand, can support themselves financially. The most prominent features of the post-widowhood phase of a woman's life are the following: emotional responsibility, emotional heights associated with freedom and personal development prospects, a new challenge in the form of the responsibility of raising children, depression, and loneliness, loss, and anxiety.

The feelings of competence, time perspective, and self-esteem of widow women were compared to those of spouses by Dreman, Orr and Aldor (1999) and according to several separate tests, widow women have a poorer sense of competence and self-esteem than married women, but they have a greater sense of time than married women.

Pakistan is a predominantly Muslim nation with a patriarchal social order that consistently violates women's fundamental human rights. On the index that measures gender inequality, Pakistan comes in at position 142 out of 188 countries (UNDP, 2015). The dynamics shift

when women acquire independence and financial stability, but there are still a variety of strategies to address gender inequities that damage the well-being of women (Chovdhuri et al., 2005). In our society, talking about widowhood is considered extremely taboo. Fear of others, shame, fear of loneliness, and alienation are all regarded as unacceptable behaviours in Pakistani society and are punished accordingly (Chandran et al., 2002). As a result of improvements in women's knowledge and education, widowhood rates in Pakistan have increased, and the percentage of married women seeking a widowhood is much greater than the percentage of married males seeking a widowhood (Corrigan, 2004).

Widowhood results in mental pressure, physical injury, financial limits, difficulty in adaptation, and housing issues (Akter and Begum, 2012). Following a divorce, women's mental health tends to decline (Sarker and Ferdous, 2017). Women and children feel the majority of the negative effects of divorce. Women in Pakistan are frequently constrained and neglected (Bhuiyan et al., 2000; Murrigan and Watson, 2002). It is impossible for women to fully regain their well-being without the support of a psychologist because domestic conflicts bring a negative impact not only on their physical but also on their mental and emotional health. The psychological, emotional, and physical obstacles that women encounter all throughout the world have long been essential to feminist work. In a culture that was mostly gendered and sexually marginalized, numerous women turned to literature as a means of self-expression. Bapsi Sidhwa, a Pakistani-American author, is recognized as one of the most successful authors writing from a post-colonial perspective. Images of India in the middle of political and social change have a great effect on Sidhwa's thought processes. The author highlights the treatment of women in India prior to freedom. Her novel, *Water*, highlights the several challenges that widows encounter in Indian culture. The novel describes how widows were viewed within the traditional culture of the Indian people. This book depicts injustice against women, which, unlike other forms of prejudice, is not limited to a certain industry, caste, or social class. In her novel *Water*, Sidhwa examines several aspects of male control and the captivity of women. One of the many ways men can exclude women from their group is on the basis of their sexual orientation. Every woman, whether married or a widow, is at the mercy of men, but the plight of widows is especially tragic.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The present study is conducted to examine how widow women perceive and seek mental health therapies in Pakistan. On the other hand, after reading the novel, *Water* readers' mind would be sufficiently perturbed, and would feel pity for the misery each widow had endured for decades. One feels worried enough to rectify every wrong committed against these defenseless, innocent humans. From the ages of eight to eighty, the widows' lives consisted only of an eternal torment in which they anxiously awaited death. Emphasis is placed on protecting and educating girl-children and widows, and remarriage is promoted. At least the condition of women in India is not as horrible as in Pakistan and other under-developed nations. This study will also relate the role of Chuiya as a widower sufferer and extract the themes through feminist analysis and converted them into a thematic analysis.

### **Research Objectives**

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

To examine how the stigma attached to widowed females influences their willingness to seek mental health therapy and to explore the portrayal of depression, vulnerability, and social attitudes in the novel, *Water*.

To examine the various aspects of men's authority, women's subjugation, and sexuality as portrayed in the novel and interpreted by the participants.

To determine the difference between the social position of married women and widowed women as depicted in the novel.

### **Research Questions**

This study addresses the following questions:

How does the stigma attached to widowed females influence their willingness to seek mental health therapy, and how are depression, vulnerability, and social attitudes portrayed in the novel, *Water*?

What are the various aspects of men's authority, women's subjugation, and sexuality as portrayed in the novel and interpreted by the participants?

Why do married women and widowed women not have the same position in society as depicted in the novel?

### **Previous Scholarships**

Numerous studies focusing on attitudes, social support, behavioural consequences, and potential have been conducted to examine significant discrepancies in the literature and the impact of these traits on the care and behaviour of individuals recovering from severe depression in future surveys. To identify groups at risk of receiving insufficient professional care, research indicates that a greater understanding and awareness of the elements that drive the cycle in those suffering from severe depression is crucial, fostering a tighter connection between them and depression treatment. Such discoveries, or their lack, indicate the need for further inquiry. In an identical line, a 2003 poll of 350 students at Al-Darmaki University discovered that senior students were more accepting of mental health issues and that receiving modern medical care did not do them any harm or cause loss of confidence (Ad-Darmaki, 2003).

### **Widowhood, Mental Health and Stigma**

Families find it especially difficult to assist females who have filed for widowhood due to the numerous limitations of widowhood in our society (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). According to studies, women face numerous psychological challenges during divorce, including shock, despair, societal pressure, tension, anxiety, and loneliness (Kohrt et al., 2014). Widow women are frequently despised and portrayed as ladies shunned from public view (Emery, 2013). Separation also diminishes society's regard for women and their families (Akter & Begum, 2012). Depression is one of the most prevalent mental illnesses worldwide, accounting for 13% of all illnesses (WHO, 2008). Not only does this result in emotional distress and social dysfunction, but it also raises the chance of self-harm (Westefeld & Furr, 1987). Additionally, another study discovered that it is one of the leading causes of disability globally (Alam et al., 2000). Pakistan's population suffers from depression at a rate of 4.1 percent and anxiety at a rate of 4.4 percent (World Health Organization, 2017).

While psychotherapy is not universally acknowledged in Asian countries, depressed individuals must have the means and tools to access proper therapies (Davis et al., 2016). Stigma, social stigma, and taboos all affect psychological well-being. As a result, it is critical to understand people's depressed attitudes to effectively combat it and develop appropriate treatments (Gopalakrishnan, 2018). However, Honwana (2001) asserts that culture generates all information on mental health in society. Because mental illness is more challenging to identify and comprehend than physical illness, culture plays a critical role in explaining and managing poor mental health. This study aims to determine how stigma affects newly widowed women's mental health-seeking behaviour in Pakistan. This will aid in determining how widow women are stigmatized and how this influences their decision not to seek help. Corrigan (2004) found that women in Pakistan face significant embarrassment, stigma, and a range of mental health problems following widowhood (Chandran et al., 2002), resulting in a scarcity of mental health facilities (Sultan & Bhuiya, 2012). In a society such as Pakistan, women seeking mental health care are stigmatized as practicing black magic or being mentally ill.

### **Social Stigma and Psychological Consequences**

Social stigma is a collection of negative attitudes and beliefs that cause people to fear, reject, avoid, and stigmatize the mentally ill (Corrigan & Penn, 1999). This type of stigma is associated with low levels of participation in mental health care and poor treatment outcomes (e.g., maintenance, adherence; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1999; New Mental Health Freedom Commission, 2003). Discrimination, declining self-government and self-governance, and isolation are consequences of social stigma (Corrigan & Shapiro, 2010; Pescosolido et al., 2007). For example, psychologically unstable persons are more likely to face discrimination, poverty, and homelessness than those not mentally ill (Corrigan et al., 2006; Corrigan and Shapiro, 2010; Corbiere et al., 2011). Additionally, stigmatizing ideas about the competence of persons experiencing psychological distress erode people's financial independence, limit opportunities, and result in mandatory treatment and diminished autonomy, e.g., through institutionalization (Pescosolido et al., 2007; Corrigan & Shapiro, 2010). Stigmatization has a detrimental effect on an individual's adjustment to divorce, as they are deemed marginalized. This further complicates an already perplexing scenario (Kitson and Morgan, 1990). One of the primary factors contributing to the stigma of widowhood is our society's view of marriage as normal. Marriage is a common component of the stigma associated with divorce. Individuals who vary from this standard are considered excluded.

### **Women's Social Position and Gender Inequality**

The study's primary objective is to determine the sensitivity of recently widowed women to the stigma associated with widowhood as documented in the preceding literature. Women face declining income and quality of life, as well as a slew of obstacles, including poverty, despair, and social stigma (Seltzer, 2000). In other words, women suffer and endure more than males following divorce. Pakistan's Planning Commission recognizes that women are more prone to be helpless during widowhood (Ahmed, 2007). Due to the stigma associated with divorce, women are more prone than males to live in public concealment of societal stigma (Afroze, 2019; Anthracite, 2019).

On the other hand, women's lives are frequently structured around traditional roles, such as housekeepers, water carriers, animal feeders, and farmers. Their standing is determined mainly by their husbands and the parents of their children. Because girls, unlike boys, are socialized to play passive roles and are given fewer opportunities to make decisions or develop leadership skills outside the family context, women have avoided equal participation in decision-making and leadership or have made little contribution to decision-making and leadership in many parts of the world. It would be even more beneficial if proper attention were paid to women and more chances were made available to them to maximize their contribution to society's growth.

### **Literary Representation of Widowhood**

In the book titled *Water*, Sidhwa analyzes the influence that Gandhi had on society. A character from the novel written by Sidhwa walks out onto the street and yells, "The British have released Gandhiji from prison!" "He has his freedom!" It is shown that he is shouting (Su, 184). This individual distributes flyers all over the place. The name Gandhi is being repeated. The conversation revolved primarily around Gandhi. In the following lines, Sidhwa paints a lovely picture of the impact that Gandhi had: "Gandhiji is here...at the Railway Station...on the way from Allahabad...Mahatma Gandhi is here..." (Water, 194). In this speech, Gandhi discusses the idea of nonviolence as well as truth.

The author Novy uses the following satirical language to characterize the predicament of widows: "What a disaster! If one widow expresses interest in marriage, then the other widows are likely to do so as well. One issue... Do you understand what he was saying? WHO? The question was only partially answered by Madhumati, who said, "Gandhi, he says, widows are strangers to love." Nobody should be out of the question to love (54).

The author Sidhwa examines a variety of facets of male dominance and the enslavement of

women in her novel *Water*. One of the various ways in which men can exclude women from their group is based on their sexuality. Every woman, regardless of whether she is married or a widow, is at the mercy of men, but the predicament of widows is particularly heartbreaking. The precarious social system that allows widows to be exploited is brought to light by Sidhwa. Femininity is an umbrella term that encompasses all attributes associated with women in general. Femininity is biological as well as social. Human sexuality has various aspects, such as biological, physical, and emotional. From a biological point of view, sex is essential for reproduction, and genitalia are present in all species to demonstrate its importance. Therefore, it is necessary for the repetition of sexual life. If we consider its emotional aspect, then it can be said that people form emotional bonds with others, and gender is a manifestation of emotional bonds such as love, trust, and care, etc.

### **Theoretical Background**

People's lived experiences reveal that each instance reflects a unique combination of factors that develop and maintain complex prejudice between cultures. The political and social climate determines the formation of hierarchies, and these hierarchies serve as the basis for policies regarding structures of injustice and the manipulation of power. The struggle for power in the face of multiple factors led to the conception of intersectionality as a conceptual analysis tool. In one of his works named "*Intersectionality Undone*," Sirma Bilge quotes Thornton Dill and Zambrano (2009), who define intersectionality as "an analytical and political weapon established by multiple prominent social actors." Intersectionality is characterized as both a theory and a practice. Political, social, and cultural lives of individuals move along diverse axes, and the formation of a form of power or the management of various institutions can destabilize a system.

The notion of intersectionality was created to address inequalities amongst women. In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality. It makes power relations visible and central to all links, addressing interconnected exclusion and subordination. Kathy Davis defines intersectionality as "the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in personal life, social practices, institutional structures, and cultural ideologies" (Davis, 68). Despite its theoretical complexity, intersectionality is a very important idea in feminist analysis due to its focus on feminist theory and further development (Davis, 169).

The intersectionality framework addresses disparities between women by focusing on multiple forms of inequality indicating marginalization. The first subfield of Western feminist studies investigates race, social class, and gender in women of color, while the second focuses on power relations arising from the interaction of race, class, and gender. These axes are interconnected and central to difference and diversity studies.

According to Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, "intersectionality as an analytical tool permits people to better comprehend the complexity of the world and themselves." Leslie McCall states that methodology in general is feminist and multidisciplinary in direction (McCall, 1795). Consequently, social and political existence is influenced by a wide range of factors.

Individual women in different social contexts have distinct experiences of subordination. Collins and Bilge note that "Black women's use of intersectionality as an analytical tool emerged in response to these obstacles" (Collins & Bilge, 3).

Class, race, gender, and ethnicity-based divisions are not restricted to the West. Savitribai Phule is a major example of early intersectional thinking in colonial India. These categories acquire meaning through power relations of racism, sexism, and class exploitation (Collins and Bilge, 2007, p. 7). There are four contexts where power can be exercised: interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural, and structural. Inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice are the core notions of intersectional thinking.

Zia Ahmed argues that "re-presentation of women" is central in feminist fiction (Ahmed, 90). Literature is a means of articulating colonized experiences (Ahmed, 91). Writers such as Bapsi

Sidhwa depict intersectional oppression of women in South Asian patriarchal societies, where religion reinforces power hierarchies. Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" highlights silenced women in these contexts. Mohanty further explains that women are produced as subjects in culturally specific ways (Ahmed, 92). This study uses intersectionality as an analytical framework to examine power relations in *Water* by Bapsi Sidhwa across interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural, and structural domains.

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative approach to achieve the objectives of the study. The efficiency of the research was further improved by merging primary and secondary data to obtain more accurate results (Greenfield, 1996). The target population consisted of Pakistani females between 18 and 49 years of age. The sample was collected through purposive sampling and comprised fifteen to eighteen widowed Pakistani females. Women who had been widowed within the last 3–5 years qualified to participate, while women widowed for more than three to five years were excluded from the study. Participants were also required to possess at least a Higher/Senior Certificate or an equivalent qualification to ensure comprehension of the English language and reasonable introspection during interviews. The study utilized both primary and secondary data. Primary data consisted of semi-structured interviews, while secondary data included the novel *Water* along with journals, newspapers, books, and articles. Interested participants were approached through Facebook Ladies Only Groups, and a Google Form was used for registration. Participants were provided with informed consent forms before participation, and each in-depth interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Only the audio or video portion of the interview was recorded with the consent of the interviewee. The interviews were conducted using a questionnaire designed by the researcher according to IDI criteria. All information gathered from participants was treated as confidential and shared only with the Chief Investigator and the supervisor.

Thematic analysis was used to organize and analyze the qualitative data. The study focused on participants' memories, opinions, knowledge, and widowhood experiences. The researcher evaluated participants' responses to identify broad trends, subjects, and ideas through an inductive analysis approach. Audio recordings were first transcribed verbatim in Urdu and then translated into English. NVIVO (version 12) software was used for analysis.

The thematic analysis process included familiarization, coding, theme development, theme definition and naming, and conclusion writing. Coding was achieved by highlighting phrases and sentences and transforming them into keywords or codes. Themes were generated by identifying patterns between codes and organizing them into clearly defined categories. After thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, the researcher also conducted a feminist analysis of the novel *Water*. The results of the study were interpreted through a feminist lens.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

This study used a qualitative research method, and qualitative data was collected through interviews conducted and transcribed by the researcher. In addition, the researcher used thematic analysis to examine the transcribed material. After extracting various codes and/or sub-themes, the researcher came up with six main themes to focus on.

Figure 4.1



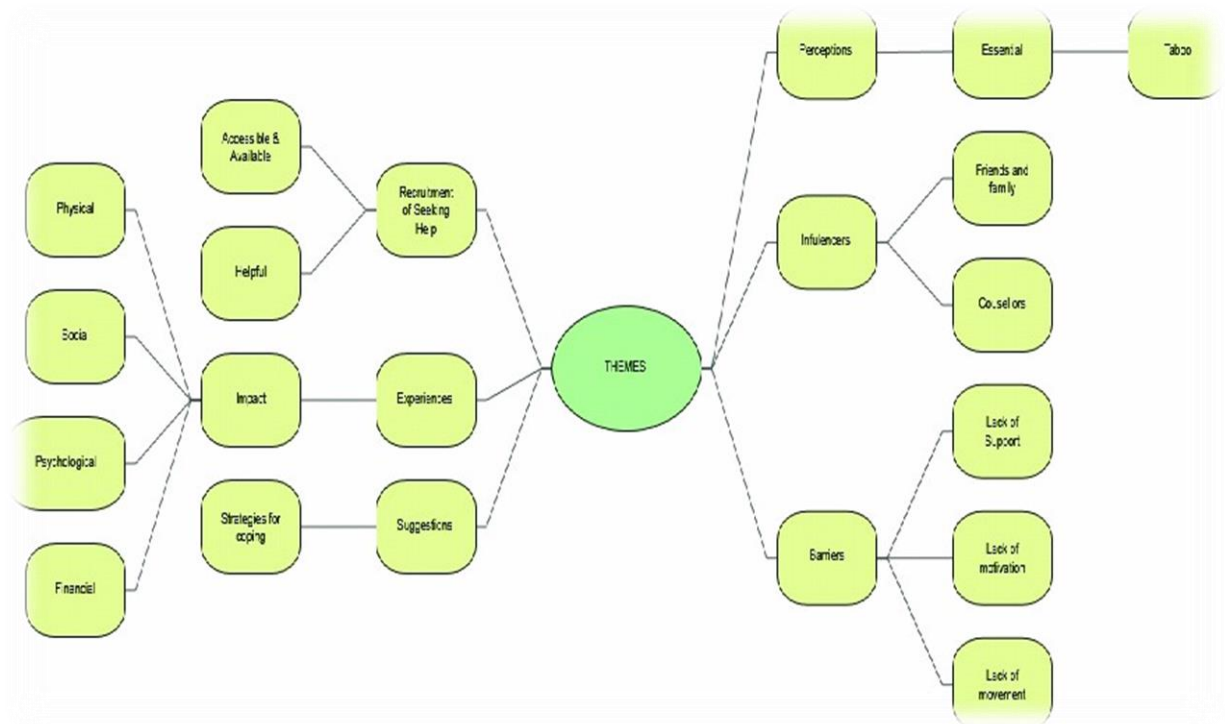


Figure 4.4  
Major themes

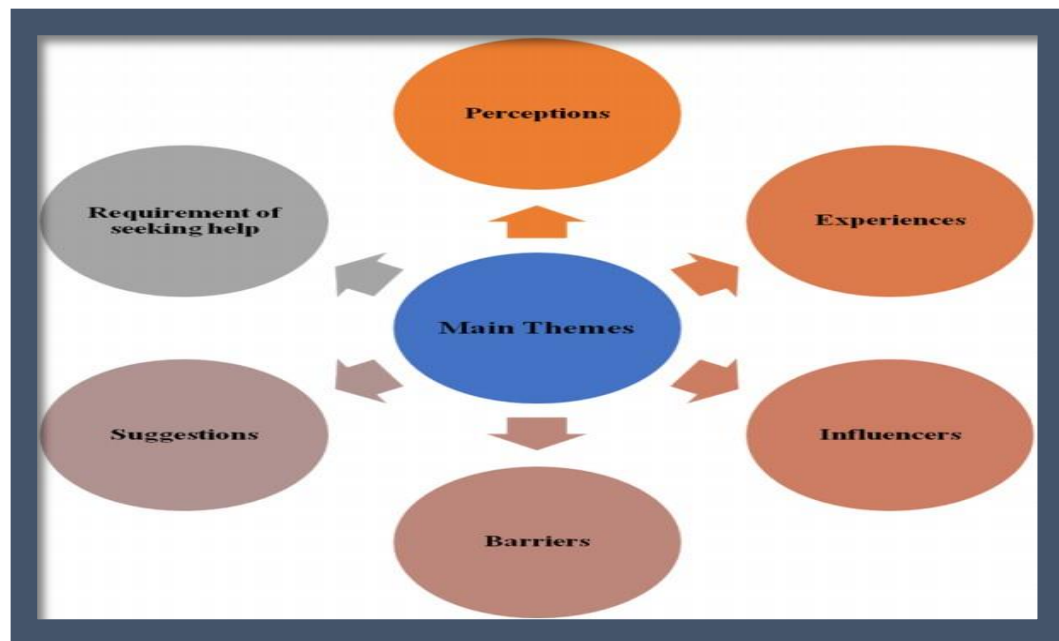


Table 4.1  
Themes of Research

Major Themes	Familiarization
Perceptions	- Necessary - Adequate - Massive gap - Taboo - Useful - Hard to find - To help people who have problems - A form of testament

<i>Experiences</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Effective -</li> <li>Helpful - Positive</li> <li>- Good impact</li> <li>- It makes me feel worse</li> <li>- Hasn't always be appropriate - Quite minimal</li> <li>- Lot of discomfort</li> </ul>
<i>Influencers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Family -</li> <li>Friends - Religion</li> <li>- Culture - Age</li> <li>- Cultural interpretation - Belief system</li> <li>- Gender stereotypes - Sanity</li> <li>- Change</li> <li>- Religious values -</li> <li>Willingness</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Education is key</li> <li>- Prayer</li> </ul>
<i>Barriers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Family abuse -</li> <li>Myself</li> <li>- Financial -</li> <li>Religion - Family</li> <li>- Fear of unknown</li> <li>- Monetary &amp; reputation</li> <li>- Don't feel reliant of weak</li> <li>- Difficulty in finding support system - Cultural issues</li> <li>- Husband strictness - Lack of acceptance - Time, resistance</li> <li>- Labelling &amp; mainstream</li> <li>- Stigma</li> </ul>

*Suggestions*

- Real & beneficial media - Increase awareness
- Required more knowledge & education - Easy access
- Less stigma
- Price & removing language barriers - Free of cost
- More advertising - Secret sessions
- More appointments - Ease& cost
- Normalize it
- Culturally responsive services - Bulk billed services

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anonymity</li> <li>- Social media campaign -</li> <li>Full Medicare support -</li> <li>Funding</li> <li>- Commercials on television -</li> <li>Broadcasting</li> <li>- More therapists covered</li> <li>- Promote mental health</li> </ul>
<i>Requirement of Seeking Help</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It is cheaper</li> <li>- Government rebate is helpful -</li> <li>Availability</li> <li>- Increasing understanding</li> <li>- Helping cultures remove the stigma -</li> <li>Encouragement</li> <li>- Easier process -</li> <li>Pocket friendly -</li> <li>Family support</li> <li>- Online information -</li> <li>Right diagnosis</li> <li>- Support</li> <li>- Ease of access -</li> <li>Last alternative -</li> <li>Confidentiality”</li> </ul>

## Interpretation

All respondents agreed that, during their time as widows, they had experienced depression and anxiety, which they ultimately attributed to the loss of their husbands. The respondents indicated that they had experienced "continuous sorrow," that they "felt helpless," and that "my own people were against me." The poor behaviour of the participants' husbands was determined to be a core cause of their depression symptoms. "Yeah, continuously ever since the marriage," said one of the participants. "My husband was an individual who filled me with dread. At the hands of my husband, I underwent verbal, emotional, and physical abuse. My mother and father married me when I was barely 20 years old. It settles the issue." The replies of the participants reveal that widowed women are more prone to feeling gloomy throughout the year. According to a synthesis of interview data, widowed women are especially susceptible to the negative consequences of anxiety and depression. This is especially true for younger widows. As a result, there are ramifications for their social lives, financial stability, and physical health.

After the loss of their husbands, the majority of widows chose to completely isolate themselves or considerably decrease their engagement in social activities. There is a correlation between the emotional agony associated with widowhood and a diminished desire for social interaction. Some of the ladies described their conduct with the phrase "refused to socialize." One of the women remarked, "Even if I visit someone's home, if

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their elders question me about the divorce, the entire family would prefer that I stay away." This was said in an effort to prevent disgrace. Pressures from the outside world affected and fostered this breach with society. The decline in social interaction is a significant consequence of this psychological disability.

Women who had recently lost a spouse experienced a reduction in both their mental health and well-being as a result of their increased worry and despondency. This was attributed to their spouse's passing. A couple of the participants admitted to having attempted suicide in the past when they were asked about their prior experiences. One participant who was shocked by the occurrence stated, "I felt isolated and suicidal." Another individual stated, "Twice in my life, I attempted to end it all by ending my own life." According to the respondents, "sleep" was yet another area of concern. One member of the group stated, "Since I couldn't sleep, I was self-prescribing sleeping drugs." Some individuals reported that they had lost the will to live, while others reported that they had lost confidence in themselves, which negatively impacted their sense of self-worth. People who have suffered psychological abuse frequently cite this as a major disadvantage of their ordeal.

In addition, women reported having difficulty keeping up with the monthly payments they were expected to make. Some respondents claimed that their mental health was negatively affected by the fact that they were unable to get a job due to their current situation, and that this was one of the reasons why. "Unfortunately, I had no choice but to stop working," said one participant. "I was defenseless due to the fact that I no longer earned a living."

This study's findings provide an explanation for the medical care-seeking behaviour of newly widowed women. Moreover, participants recognized specific causes for the occurrence of a number of these behaviours. Despite the fact that many women reported being unaware for an extended period of time that psychotherapy and counselling are supported by medical research for the treatment of depression and anxiety, they still sought the assistance of a mental health professional at some point. This demonstrates the perceived effectiveness of treatment for mental health disorders. This phenomenon is represented by a participant who claimed, "After my parents' divorce, I became so dependent on them that I never wanted to attend treatment." This participant is a prime illustration of the phenomenon. Another participant stated, "I was unaware of any alternative treatment facilities in the vicinity that would meet my requirements. I did not learn about the rehabilitation center where I was attending until after I had completed my MBA and started working." A huge number of women sought help for their anxiety at a variety of medical facilities. Another woman disclosed that her doctor had prescribed antidepressants following a consultation. Many individuals believe that "treatment can be somewhat effective, but spiritual healing is necessary for full recovery to be possible." Despite the fact that the majority of women would benefit from contacting a doctor about their mental health, this belief remains prevalent.

According to the findings of the study, a lack of financial resources is one of the most important hurdles to obtaining medical care for recently widowed women. Due to a lack of funding, several children were forced to drop out of school. One participant stated, "My therapist predicted that I would need a total of 12 sessions to address my concerns, and she told me that I would not be able to afford weekly time off from my responsibilities during this period."

When women received family and friend support, they were more likely to seek medical care. Unfortunately, many families may not be able to completely support participation

in therapeutic activities. "It was difficult for my parents to accept that I should get counselling," said one participant. "Even though it benefits me financially, my parents continue to disapprove of my twice-monthly treatment appointments." A final comment was made along these lines: "Both my parents and I were taught to mistrust the therapeutic benefits of counselling and psychotherapy. Instead, they recommend that I pray."

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of social stigma on the behaviour of bereaved women seeking mental health therapy, with a particular focus on symptoms of depression and anxiety. The study is based on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water*, which highlights the mental, emotional, and physical challenges faced by women. One of the central themes explored in the novel is underage marriage and its consequences for women in pre-independence India. Through the characters of Chuya, Kalyani, and Shakuntala, the author illustrates the condition of women during that period. The research adopted a qualitative methodology, and the collected data were analyzed using a thematic framework. In-depth interviews were conducted and analyzed following the thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke. The study found that widows' mental health is severely affected by social stigma, discrimination, and limited awareness regarding mental health services. The purpose was to determine how Pakistani women perceive and understand stigma and to identify areas that should be prioritized in future efforts to reduce its impact.

The first theme concerns participants' perceptions of seeking help from trained specialists. Participants emphasized the importance of confidentiality, privacy, and professional support. One participant described professional assistance as beneficial because a professional can provide objective advice without personal involvement. The findings suggest that several socio-demographic and cultural factors influence help-seeking behaviour, including age, socioeconomic status, family background, and the severity of mental health problems.

The second theme focuses on participants' experiences with mental health services. While some participants reported positive outcomes, others expressed dissatisfaction. One participant stated that she had never sought mental health therapy and did not intend to do so, whereas others reported both positive and negative experiences with counselling and treatment.

The third theme highlights the influence of family, friends, culture, religion, and social networks on help-seeking behaviour. Participants reported that support from family and close relatives can encourage individuals to seek treatment. However, cultural beliefs and social attitudes may also discourage mental health treatment. Previous studies similarly indicate that social support and attitudes significantly affect recovery and treatment-seeking behaviour.

The fourth theme identifies barriers to seeking mental health support. Participants reported stigma, labelling, financial constraints, lack of resources, family pressure, cultural expectations, and personal hesitation as major obstacles. One participant remarked, "All of this can be a barrier, but if I needed treatment, I wouldn't tell anyone," reflecting the continuing impact of stigma.

The fifth theme relates to participants' recommendations for improving mental health services. Participants suggested increasing awareness through social media campaigns and public broadcasts, reducing stigma, providing free or affordable services, and

employing more therapists. One participant emphasized that increasing knowledge and strengthening social support are essential for reducing negative social perceptions and encouraging people to seek professional help. Previous research also indicates that greater awareness leads to more positive attitudes toward mental health services.

The final theme concerns the factors that encourage individuals to seek help. Participants identified affordability, accessibility, confidentiality, awareness, family support, and the availability of therapists as important requirements. Many participants stated that they were more likely to seek treatment when services were easy to access, affordable, and responsive to their needs. Although they faced several obstacles, they ultimately recognized the value of professional mental health support.

### **Feminist Analysis**

*Water* by Sidhwa focuses on Ashram widows and portrays them as powerless victims of social, religious, and patriarchal structures. Through the lives of Chuya, Kalyani, and Shakuntala, the novel highlights the oppression, exploitation, and marginalization of widows in pre-independence India. The analysis shows that the novel is shaped by cultural hegemony and a gender-based perspective, reflecting key concerns of feminist philosophy.

The novel sheds light on the mistreatment and destitution of widows, who are denied the right to remarry, wear jewellery, participate in celebrations, or live freely. In the name of religion, widows are portrayed as symbols of misfortune and are often treated as social outcasts. Feminist writing has long addressed the mental, emotional, and physical challenges faced by women, and Bapsi Sidhwa uses *Water* to expose the suffering caused by child marriage, widowhood, and patriarchal domination.

The novel demonstrates how widows are subjected to unequal treatment across social and economic boundaries. Although reforms such as the abolition of *sati* and the legalization of widow remarriage were introduced during British rule, widows continue to face discrimination, poverty, social isolation, and sexual exploitation. Many are deprived of inheritance rights and are forced into begging, singing, dancing, or prostitution as a means of survival.

Through the experiences of Chuya, the novel illustrates the cruelty of child marriage and the hardships of widowhood. Married at the age of six to a much older man, Chuya is sent to a widow ashram after her husband's death. Life in the ashram is marked by poverty, social exclusion, and strict religious control. Similarly, Kalyani and Shakuntala represent the suffering of widows who are denied freedom, dignity, and personal choice. The novel also highlights the influence of patriarchy and religious authority. Widows are viewed as burdens and are expected to devote their lives to sacrifice and renunciation. Brahmins and other powerful figures manipulate religious teachings to maintain control over women and justify their oppression. As a result, widows become vulnerable to social and sexual exploitation.

At the same time, *Water* presents the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, whose ideas of truth, non-violence, and social reform inspire resistance against oppressive traditions. Gandhi's message encourages women to question social restrictions and seek dignity and equality. Through Shakuntala's efforts to rescue Chuya and challenge the existing order, the novel reflects the possibility of social change.

Overall, the novel exposes the injustice, hypocrisy, and discrimination faced by widows under patriarchal and religious systems. The novel demonstrates how women are valued only in relation to men and how cultural hegemony shapes their lives. From a feminist

perspective, the text challenges gender inequality and advocates women's right to dignity, freedom, and social recognition.

The number of mothers forced to raise their children as widows is rising globally, particularly in Pakistan. Unfortunately, discrimination against this group continues to intensify over time. Some members of the public argue that the persistence of sexism is linked to interconnected taboos and fears shaped by contemporary society. Mental health disparities exist in every culture and have far-reaching consequences for individuals and communities. Specialists in the field of stigma emphasize the need for community-based interventions tailored to local stigma-related issues. The findings of this study suggest that certain fundamental practices are especially important for reducing bias and promoting awareness in regional communities.

This study also highlights the invisible hardships faced by the women portrayed in *Water* before India's independence. Through its characters, the novel illustrates the negative consequences of child marriage and widowhood. The innocent child Chuya leaves a lasting impression on readers, symbolizing the loss of childhood due to social and cultural practices. Before reaching maturity, she is married off because she is viewed as a financial burden on her family. The responsibility for this suffering lies not only with parents but also with society as a whole. Girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often lack the confidence and power to challenge such decisions, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and control by others.

The study concludes that *Water* reflects the plight of subcontinental women in the 1930s, particularly widows. The novel portrays a society in which men occupy positions of power while women remain marginalized. As a result, the text strongly emphasizes the subordination of women and exposes the social, cultural, and patriarchal structures that sustain gender inequality.

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