

Widowhood: An Evil Aspect of Womanhood

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Abstract—*The Indian society has always awarded a secondary status to women which becomes even more diluted when they get widowed. India has taken a gigantic leap since independence from being a British colony to the fastest growing economy in the world, but the widows here continue to lead a miserable and pitiable life. They have abundance of problems due to the doctrine of patriarchy and social debasement. A paradigm shift is needed in our attitude towards widows in order to provide them a life of security and social recognition. Indira Goswami got widowed at the young age of 21, after only an year and a half of her marriage. The deprivations of the body and the mind; the social stigma attached to the condition and apathy of the society encouraged her to give a vent to her feelings by writing about the miserable condition of widows all around. Goswami's protagonists are generally widows who forfeit their chances of a happy and fruitful life as widowhood engulfs them. They are tied down by age old traditions and unscientific customs which add to their tale of woes. This paper aims to study the problem of widowhood in India with special reference to Indira Goswami's protagonists namely – Giribala from *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and Saudamini in *The Blue Necked God*. They are young widows with a zest for life but the restrictions posed by widowhood tie them down but they rebel against the norms laid down by the patriarchal society to marginalise and exploit women. They preferred to give up living than live in restrictions. Their suicide at the end of the respective novels does not signify their defeat, it is a symbol of their liberation from the curse of widowhood.*

1. Introduction

The condition of women in India particularly widows has seen several phases from that of respect and equality in the Rig Vedic times to that of fear, subjugation and exploitation in the Mughal period. During those times evils like polygamy, sati and child marriage were rampant. Western education brought by the British colonisers helped to create awareness and the social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar worked hard to root out evils like sati, child marriage and the purdah system thereby improving the condition of women in India. It took years of hard work to bring about a perceptible change in the society.

The Indian society has always awarded a secondary status to women which becomes even more diluted in case they get widowed. Historically, traditions like widow burning or 'sati' characterised the norms of Hindu society for widows. The treatment they got was extremely discriminatory and inhuman.

Practises such as sati were abolished during the British rule and in 1856 they legalised widow remarriage in India. More than a century and a half has passed away since then; India has gained independence, economic liberalisation and globalisation have transformed our basic cultural system. Yet, widows still lead a miserable and pitiable life in many places in India. They face variety of societal taboos everyday and practice austerity and self-denial. The traditional belief is that once a woman's husband dies, she must denounce worldly pleasures. They are forced to wear plain white sarees as a sign of mourning for as long as they live. Their presence at rituals, ceremonies and celebrations is considered inauspicious. In some orthodox families they are also made to shave their heads. In some parts of South India, the practice of not wearing a blouse under one's saree is prevalent among widows.

In the patriarchal set up of the Indian society, women derive their status from their husbands. Widows have always been regarded as a misfortune. Efforts have been made since colonial times to improve the condition of women. Yet examples of glaring gender discrimination still exist. Widows have abundance of problems due to the doctrine of patriarchy and social debasement. The most vulnerable among them are the ones who live alone or stay with unmarried children. Some of the problems that they face are- responsibility of rearing the children, lack of companionship, violence, stigma in remarriage, sexuality, victimisation, economic inadequacy and adjustment problems with their own family. In most of the developing countries, millions of widows live in acute insecurity, misery, deprivation and violence. Even though there are laws relating to inheritance, land ownership and child custody, but still there exists a large gap between the legal measures and practices due to the rigid patriarchal attitude towards women. This attitude is responsible for discrimination between a widow and a widower. Widowers have the freedom to move anywhere and participate in social functions. They do not have any kind of restriction on their food, dress or behaviour. They lead a blameless life after losing their wives but the widowed women are blamed for the demise of their spouses. Men continue to dress up as they used to do earlier and move on with their lives. On the other hand women spend

their whole lives carrying the burden of blame and live in eternal mourning.

Indian family as a social institution is well known for the emotional and physical support that it provides to its members, but at times it fails to respond to the needs of women especially women in difficult conditions for example widows. The inauspiciousness of the widows is the main reason for this indifferent attitude towards them. They are stigmatised as women who have failed to safeguard their husband's life. A widow from a relatively well-to-do family may be subjected to greater cruelty and abuse by her in-laws than a widow from the lower ranks, who are free to work out side and to remarry. They neither get socio-economic support nor do they get counselling and emotional support in distress from the family or the society. Thus, they are forced to live a socially ostracised, economically dependent, physically austere and spiritually pious life.

2. Images of Widows by Indira Goswami

Goswami's widows forfeit their chances of a happy and fruitful life as widowhood engulfs them and cease to be treated as humans they are tied down by age old traditions and unscientific customs which add to their tale of woes. Young widows Saudamini and Giribala in *The Blue Necked God* and *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* respectively question the senseless restrictions which bog them down. Mostly they are young beautiful women with a free spirit, inspite of the tragedies that they suffer, they have a zest for life and want to live it fully.

As portrayed in *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, in traditional Hindu society widows were considered inauspicious. When Giribala, the young protagonist widowed at the tender age of sixteen years comes back to her parents, women are advised not to go near her. They are told, "Don't touch her! Don't touch her! You women with sindoor. She is a widow now!"

She is an exceptionally beautiful and intelligent woman who could not bear the cruel and torturous rituals of widowhood practised at her father-in-law's place at Bangara Satra. These hard and inhuman rituals resulted in the death of her unborn child in her womb. She was brought back by her parents to their place because they couldnot bear the agony of their daughter. At her father's place also she faced restrictions, to her dislike. She is a rebel at heart and opposes all the unnecessary do's and don't's put on her.

Crushing social restrictions weigh heavily on the widows. They are not even allowed to eat food like normal people. They are supposed to take strictly vegetarian diet, even shunning onion, garlic and masoor dal. In the days of 'Ambubasi' festival they were not supposed to touch the ground with their feet, spending most of their time on wooden cots. For going to open air toilet in the forest, they wore pieces of bark of the betel nut trees, known as 'dhakuwa'. For these

four days they were not even allowed cooked food and drank water kept in brass or mud pitchers placed on bamboo shelves. They ate raw fruits and drank unboiled milk. A sacred injunction of widowhood is that she is not supposed to eat meat. It was considered a great sin to even smell the aroma of forbidden food, for the brahmin widows. Giribala violates all these norms by eating meat which was a taboo. She fails to overcome the temptation and forgetting everything-religion and rituals, wisdom or restraint-she starts gulping it down in a hurry. She is caught red-handed and beaten mercilessly by her mother in a fit of rage:

When the Gossainee heard about it, she left the kitchen and rushed to the spot. In a fit of rage, she caught hold of Giribala's braids and started kicking her. She was like a tigress in rage. She pulled her hair, punched her and clawed at her—as if she would tear off her flesh!

The protagonist, Giribala's fatal attraction for mark is the hallmark of the novel. She got widowed after a few years of sad and torturous marriage to a callous man. Her young heart throbbed for the missionary, Mark, who was on a trip to collect ancient Assamese manuscripts. She was assisting him in his work. His care and concern caught her attention and love blossomed in her heart. She expressed her desire to be freed from her monotonous life and the shackles of widowhood. Mark was very respectful to her family and their reputation and showed restraint over his feelings towards Giribala. Due to the fear of being taken away by her father-in-law's men she ran away to Marks cottage. In the morning, suspecting an amorous relationship between the two, a few men led by her family priest appeared and tied Mark and took Giribala for penance to purify her soul 'for sleeping with an outcaste'. The ritual required her to sit in a hut which would be set afire and then run out from it. When the hut was set ablaze, she did not come out and was soon enveloped by the raging fire. The stunned onlookers could not rescue her. This tragic self-immolation of Giribala is her final act of rebellion that ends a young life along with its unfulfilled desires.

Saudamini in *The Blue Necked God* gets widowed after an year of a happy marriage. She befriends a Christian youth. This friendship was forbidden by her parents and the family shifted to 'Braj' to snap the emotional ties between her and the friend. In the holy land Saudamini witnessed different forms of perversions that were rampant there and found no solace there, and her rebellious spirit grew more aggressive. Being young her desires of the body and the mind manifested in many ways which she could not suppress:

She was trying her best to forget her loneliness, but it was not easy. Sometimes she would scrutinise her own body. She had a lovely, soft young body. Even the mental imbalance and torture of the past seven years had not been able to leave any permanent mark on this lovely body. Try as she might she could not come to terms with the condition of her life or her situation. Was there anyone else, she wondered, who had

suffered as she had, who had been compelled to face a situation like hers?

She was not the only one suffering in 'Braj', but many like her of all ages who were bidding their time in the holy city were silent sufferers. The poor radheshyamis i.e. widows who sang devotional songs in the temples were subjected to severe exploitation in the name of religion. There, with no one to look after their needs, they sang hymns in the temples to earn a meagre sum to make their two ends meet. Uncared for, they suffered unthinkably-hiding their hunger and diseases like leprosy and saving money for their last rites. In a hope to get a befitting funeral they starved themselves and saved the money. Abandoned by their families they had nowhere to go. These pathetic conditions moved Saudamini who questioned the reasonability of such a life of widowhood. She resented the life of emotional inadequacy and looked for fulfilment in life. She longed for a life of love, companionship and sexual fulfilment. Being young she found it difficult to rein in her desires; her frustration comes to the fore when she discusses her longings with the painter Chandrabhanu:

You are an artist and you understand feelings, emotions. Believe me when I say that I have seriously analysed myself, and that I know that my zest for life, my emotions, and my passions and desires have not undergone any change.

She tries to adjust to the life in 'Braj' by helping her father who is a doctor. Her father Dr. Roychoudhury sets up a clinic to look after the sick and suffering people in the holy city. He looks forward to his daughter's helping hand. She starts off by serving the sick people with a lot of dedication but becomes disinterested soon. Her inner frustration grows by seeing pain and suffering everywhere in the holy land. She is moved to anger and questions the wrongs being perpetrated in name of religion and salvation in the land of the Lord. She roams aimlessly losing interest in her father's clinic and longs for the companionship of her Christian friend. All the efforts of her parents fail in curbing her relationship with him. Her insecurities kept on growing.. She was a rebel by nature and a non-conformist. Her curiosity took her on to the forbidden path. She went wherever she was asked not to go and did whatever was prohibited. She was on the lookout for a rebel like her and asked, 'Has anyone like me ever come to this sacred land of Braj?' But she could find none. She refused to be tied down by the charity work of her father and protested and demanded her autonomy thus:

I cannot spend my entire life like this, doing charity work...I am not a devi, I am an ordinary girl, and I cannot pass all my years in serving society like you...I am an independent person, and I fear no one and nothing!

She wanted to lead a happy and conjugal life with her Christian friend but not at the cost of her parents life. When her father arranges for her meeting with him, she goes there to meet him on the banks of Yamuna on a stormy night. The much anticipated meeting with the man whose company she

longed for did not bring her much joy, as she realised that her life with the Christian youth would not be acceptable to her mother in particular and the conservative society in general. She is torn between her desires and filial responsibilities. Realising that her mother would not be able to survive after finding out about her encounter with the man she loved, she decides to end her life in the storm-ravaged Yamuna. Unable to bear the burden of widowhood and its ensuing restrictions; she deems it fit to die rather than live a life of bondage.

Shashiprova, the other young widow in this novel, also suffers due to her single status. She lives alone in the holy city, as she is an orphan. A young widow with no one to take care, she lives with an old priest, Alamgarhi. She does not like living with the priest but it is an arrangement that she cannot deny as it provides her shelter in a hostile world. She dreams of freedom from the bondage of Alamgarhi. When the original owners of the temple arrive, he is forced to find employment elsewhere and thus Shashiprova gets her much needed freedom. Soon she comes face to face with reality when she finds odd people following her and making lurid advances. She feels, she was safer with the priest, who passes away after sometime. This novel presents the ordeal of the widows when there is no one to look after them. The younger widows struck by hunger and poverty are forced to take up prostitution. The holy land of 'Braj' offers them no consolation. They live by selling their bodies. Once old and emaciated they are reduced to singing bhajans in the temples to earn two square meals a day. They suffer tremendously - suffering from old age and hunger along with innumerable sexually transmitted diseases and leprosy. Their lives become a living hell as they wait for their final call for liberation from the eternal pain and suffering. Papari Das describes it in his paper as:

The widows in the Braja had right to seek pleasure, bodily or otherwise but to submit their lives to singing Lord Krishna's praises in the temples of the sacred town where they were invariably exploited by wolves in human shapes. Their bodies ravaged, their minds broke, due to their penury and lack of family support. Even after the death of the widows of the Braja, due veneration was not donated to their dead bodies. People fought for the meagre possessions of the poor dead women. Sometimes while fighting some of the blows hit the dead bodies too. But nobody cared about such things in Braja.

Young widows in 'Braj' were unremitting victims of sexual abuse as there was no dearth of wicked and licentious people there. The priests kept destitute women in their rooms who served them as helpers in the temple duties during the day and accompanied them in their beds during night. This illicit relationship was cloaked under the placard of 'Jugal Upasana'. Shashiprova also faced similar conditions when she had to seek shelter and security in Alamgarhi's room as she was young and 'human wolves' were after her and she had nowhere to go. This arrangement did not pose much threat to her as Alamgarhi being an eunuch could not take advantage of

her. She was compelled to live with him for her security and sustenance.

3. Conclusion

Goswami's widows in spite of the hardships and unfavourable social conditions look forward to leading a normal and fulfilling life. They look forward to the future with a hopeful heart. The three widows in *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* find themselves in stifling condition but that does not deter them from dreaming of a happy future with their loved ones. Saru Gossainee thinks of Mahidhar as a foundation of her troublesome existence, after losing her husband. Giribala finds in Mark a companion; a soulmate with whom she wants to spend the rest of her life. Durga harbours no such dreams as Giribala or Saru Gossainee but plans to visit the holy Ganges to immerse her dead husband's ashes in the holy river according to his last wishes. She lives a miserable life only hoping to die in peace in her dead husband's home. She bears all kinds of torturous practices without a trace of rebellion as future holds no hope for her except for a peaceful death. She lives only in the hope of fulfilling her husband's last wishes and to go on a pilgrimage to atone of her sins of being a widow. Saru and Giribala are much younger and harbour desires of the body and the mind. Saru finds herself attracted to this man, Mahidhar who appears to serve her faithfully under all circumstances. Giribala who is a charming and vibrant young girl helps Mark, a missionary in restoring old Assamese manuscripts and falls in love with him. Saudamini also, wants a fulfilling life experience in spite of being a widow. After losing her husband she finds solace in the company of a Christian youth. Their closeness becomes unacceptable to her parents who take her to the holy city 'Braj' to divert her mind from the young man. Lovelorn Saudamini does not find peace in the holy city and wanders aimlessly seeking answers to her questions and in the process meets the famous painter Chandrabhanu Rakesh. She asks him if she is the only widow suffering due to her physical and emotional unfulfilled desires. He consoles her by saying that everyone in this world is suffering; some more or some less.

Goswami's widows seek and existence beyond widowhood. They are entirely human, capable of loving and being loved. Society fails to acknowledge this fact that they are human entities and need to be treated so. They try to break the shackles which have been hounding women for centuries.

They refuse to be tied down by age old customs and stifling traditions. Society fails to provide them a respectable position. In her sympathetic portrayal of widowhood, Indira Goswami has tried to highlight the problem which still manifests in the Indian society and is dragging it backwards. The horrors of widowhood have troubled several thinkers and reformers who championed the cause of widows and advocated several remedial measures like abolition of 'sati', child marriage restriction and widow remarriage during the last two centuries. In order to prevent inhuman practices against widows; social legislations were passed. Social activists in different parts of India have implemented a number of projects with a view to improve the condition of widows. Central and state governments, along with the NGOs are working in sync to promote their welfare, but this is incomplete without the sensitisation of the society and economic emancipation of the widows so that they can lead a respectable life.

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