

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Essay On Widowhood: Critiquing the Position of Women in the Hindu Society

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Abstract

In this age of growing feminism and heightened focus on a sensitive, progressive attitude to gender equality and human rights, widows find themselves less burdened and ideally positioned. However, the idea of achieving seamless perfection remains a utopian vision, as there are still innumerable instances, particularly in rural India, of women suffering extreme anguish and shame following the death of their male counterparts. In addition to grief and the burden of stigma, the utter disdain with which they are treated whenever they attempt to behave as thinking beings vocalising their desires and hopes is heartbreaking; they are expected to be docile and acquiescent and surrender before an aberrant code of conduct that lays down preposterous norms and obligations, or else they are downgraded and mercilessly attacked by the flag-bearers of patriarchal authoritarianism.

Widows must suffer till death and stay chaste, according to religious teachings. After her husband's death, the wife will be reincarnated in a jackal's womb if she degenerates. Though no tangible truth attesting to these traditional beliefs has been concretely deciphered or categorically accepted by human scepticism, concrete critics and researchers have left no stone unturned to denigrate these dogmatic tenets and worn-out ideologies and work tirelessly towards a brighter future for all deprived women. Indira Goswami is one of the rare writer

activists who have spoken out against women's abuse via her writing. Her personal widowhood may have inspired her to represent a genuine widow fighting clichés that have poisoned society. She has a lot of love and compassion for the oppressed, especially widows, and she isn't afraid to vent her indignation and fury while challenging widows' antiquated traditions and constraints. She has spoken out against women's violence since childhood, despite her sadness. She writes with confidence, courage, and determination and has courageously expressed her dissatisfaction with our constitutional structure as a real humanitarian and effective social activist. In her writings, she has not only tried to expose widows' and other women's mistreatment but also to illuminate their lives and halt their harsh torture.

Keywords: Widowhood, patriarchal, deprived, authoritarianism, humanitarian, social activist.

Since ancient times, women in India have witnessed innumerable brutal assaults and grappled incessantly with the most gruelling circumstances in order to thrive and mushroom as relentless individuals. Indian society, with its patriarchal outlook, has always been quite critical and unforgiving to women who categorically opposed a savage system with the projection of a searing temperament. With women getting increasingly mortified and pushed to the fringes of society, the social system has emerged as a vast breeding ground of ignominy and discrimination. Societal evils are as old and convoluted as society itself and amidst the myriad contemptible factors that have been working corrosively in order to impede the ideal functioning of the system we live in, is the very notion of communal segregation. Endless narratives of marginalization have been recorded on various levels throughout history but the arduous journey of women in perpetual conflict with the ever-prevalent toxic bigotry has been an immensely pathetic sight to witness. The heinous truth is that the miserable plight of women

gives sadistic pleasure to the silent onlookers in the peanut-crunching crowd who push and shove each other just to ogle tormented female bodies and ridicule their battered souls.

Much discussion has been made, both candidly and flagrantly at times, by researchers, academicians, and literary activists in their thought-provoking works to bring into our view the disgrace and monstrosity of treatment that a woman's life is enwrapped with, particularly the ones that are lonesome, deprived, and deserted. Society fails to empathise with these sentient beings who are trapped in situations that are constantly spiralling out of their control. A great deal of belligerence and callousness to be endured by the widows in an Indian cultural context speaks volumes regarding the violence and injustice meted out against them by the foundations of patriarchy. The widow's inescapable predicament, with her husband, long deceased and departed, makes her hopelessly vulnerable to severe hostilities that demand blind acclimatisation and continue to persecute her until the complete disruption of her mental and emotional well-being. The fact that they have to bear the brunt of the repercussions of such a tragedy that isn't even orchestrated by them is the main source of their suppressed chagrin towards the chauvinist social order. Furthermore, they compensate for the loss of a living member of society by being reduced to forlorn doormats who trundle along the path of never-ending desolation with heavy hearts.

An inhumane tradition like Sati was seen as the ultimate show of widespread devotion to a deceased person in our nation that has been treating widows so disparagingly. Sati was not seen as suicide since its proponents praised it as the expected behaviour of good women; otherwise, the Hindu Scriptures would have forbidden or discouraged it. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak recounts the act of Sati as follows:

The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of her dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is called widow sacrifice...The abolition of this rite has been generally understood as a case of 'white men saving brown women from brown

men.' Against this, is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: "The women actually want to die." (93)

According to Spivak, the denial of breath and life is a part of how women are subordinated to the superstructure of male domination; the subaltern woman (widow) isn't supposed to die to uphold the honour of her late husband; rather, it's assumed that she wants to pass away. It is obvious that women have no sense of self-identification because the sacrificial person's death is dependent upon the passing of her spouse. However, it won't be an exaggeration to assert that Indian society has come a long way - from acknowledging the burning to death of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre as the ultimate form of womanly devotion and sacrifice to vehemently negating the assimilation of the Hindu practice of Sati in our culture, the system no doubt realised the necessity to safeguard and not to shun widows so ruthlessly. However, the situation is paradoxical since, despite the efforts of Hindu reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and India's Governor General, Lord William Bentick, the practice of physical immolation still persists under the guise of psychological immolation.

In this age of escalating feminism and heightened emphasis on a sensitive, progressive approach towards gender equality and human rights, widows find themselves less encumbered and ideally positioned to a considerable extent. But the dream of attaining seamless perfection continues to remain a utopian vision, for unfortunately, there are still numerous instances, especially in the rural areas of India, of women undergoing unbearable pain and humiliation after the demise of their male counterparts. In addition to grief and the burden of stigma, the utter disdain with which they get spurned each time they try to behave as thinking beings vocalising their desires and hopes is heart-wrenching; they are supposed to be docile and acquiescent and surrender before an aberrant code of conduct that lays down preposterous norms and obligations, or else they are downgraded and mercilessly attacked by the flag-bearers of patriarchal authoritarianism. It was customary in Hindu culture for a widow to lead

the life of an ascetic after the death of her husband. This included giving up all social activities, shaving her head, restricting her diet to only boiled rice, wearing white clothes, and sleeping on thin, coarse matting. It's possible that many people would have preferred to end their lives, particularly those who were still young women when their spouses passed away. In this context, Athavale writes, 'we live in a patriarchal society. Men say that culturally as a widow you cannot grow your hair; you should not look beautiful...' (45). Furthermore, she criticizes the very custom of shaving heads in her autobiography and writes:

Who knows who was the damn author of the custom of shaving head. It is not even Ramayan or Mahabharat. We do not know whether the custom existed in the Vedic period. We learn from men that it is found in the laws of Manu. (51)

Widows' situations have not considerably changed despite the many initiatives designed to highlight the ideas of women's empowerment. In reality, these women know very little about the programmes established by the Indian government for their benefit. They have no choice but to constrict their lives. The terrible aspect is that their own female equivalents in the same household impose limitations and constraints. In other words, it was believed that a woman could not exist independently of her husband, and that, after the death of her husband, she would be barred from having a second marriage. Perhaps it was believed that a woman had no identity when she was separated from her husband because of the belief that she could not exist without him. Due to the nature of this institution, widows are not permitted to remarry. As Dr. Anjani Kant writes regarding the Hindu culture and system, 'widows' remarriage was virtually non-existent among the Hindus' (55). In fact, the Hindu tradition requires chastity even after the spouse has died. The woman should remain devoted by not thinking about other men even after the demise of the male counterpart. According to Manu, 'the sacred texts did not [...] allow a widow even to mention the name of another man in connection with marriage' (50). So to say, the absence of a husband in no way excuses the widows from remarrying, and

hence they are compelled to embrace the concept of monogamy, where men are free to adopt polygamy even when their female counterparts are alive. As Maria Mies in *Indian Woman and Patriarchy: Conflicts and Dilemma of Students and Working Women* illustrates the so-called sanctified duties of women:

...the duty of the wife is to worship her 'master' (pati) as her first God; for only thus can she hope to make spiritual gains. Her prayers, sacrifices, fasts, ascetic exercises and pilgrimage are all for the salvation of the husband, she must always try to please him and serve him. Above all she should in no way give even the impression of violating marital fidelity, neither during the lifetime of her husband not after his death. (44)

The sacred texts declare that the widows should be subjected to perpetual suffering until death, remaining self-restrained and chaste. If the woman is found to be treading on the path of decadent values and morals after her husband's death, she is to be reborn in the womb of a jackal. Though no palpable truth attesting to these traditional beliefs has either been concretely deciphered or categorically accepted by human scepticism, critics and researchers have left no stone unturned to denigrate these dogmatic tenets and worn-out ideologies and work ceaselessly towards a brighter tomorrow for all deprived women. Eminent Indian English writer, Indira Goswami is one of the very few writer activists who have raised their voices against the violence encountered by women through their works. Her own position as a widow might have provided her with the necessary impetus to portray the realistic image of a widow struggling with stereotypes that have corroded the societal setup. She exhibits a great deal of sympathy and compassion for the disadvantaged and oppressed, widows in particular, and she does not hold back from showing her rage and fury when it comes to protesting against the backward customs and limits that are imposed on widows. Despite having suffered from depression since she was a youngster, she has never ceased speaking out against the brutality

that is inflicted upon women. In every piece that she has written, she exudes an air of self-assurance, fearlessness, and resolve. As a true humanitarian and an efficient social activist, she boldly manifested a strong sense of disgust and disgruntlement against the incompetence of our constitutional framework. She used her writing as a weapon to bring to light the injustices perpetrated against widows and other women. Her objective was not only to shed light on their lives and sorrows but also to put an end to the brutal punishment that had been meted out to them. As writer Amitav Ghosh has said,

Indira Goswami is one of the pre-eminent literary figures in India and a woman of remarkable courage and conviction... She has also been an important voice in championing women's causes, and has done much to highlight the plight of widows. (“Indira Goswami – Zubaan”)

During the time that she spent in Vrindavan, Goswami grabbed the opportunity to view the widows at close range, and the sight of them fighting for their lives really affected her. She was jarred to see their deplorable condition, in which they had no choice but to go about begging for food in order to put some money down for their funeral expenses. While aiming at social reformation and amelioration of the condition of widows in society, she made rigorous endeavours to depict their physical and psychological wounds in an uproarious manner.

It is breathtaking to perceive how intricately she explored the nuances of area-specific caste systems in India, in her short story *The Offspring*; the plot of which encompasses the questions of motherhood, patriarchy, and casteism and is mainly a moving projection of the struggle for survival of a Brahmin widow. Pitambar Mahajan, a rich man in his fifties, marries for the second time in the hope of having a son after the death of his first wife, but the sight of his sick bedridden wife only continues to disappoint him until he meets Damayanti, a beautiful Brahmin widow of high standing who has prostituted herself to feed her two girl children. Knowing that Damayanti is in need of financial support and protection, Pitambar decided to

act as a messiah by expressing his wish to marry her, though with an ulterior motive to get a child from her. Damayanti's reluctance to marry despite her utter poverty reveals her extreme sense of pride, which she associates with her high caste status:

She was infuriated! She spat out. 'That pariah! How dare he send this proposal to me! Doesn't he know that I am the Jajamani Brahmin caste and he, the vermin, is a low caste Mahajan?' (77)

In this passage, Goswami exposes the phoney pride and superiority complex of a Brahmin widow who can stoop to embrace harlotry but won't get married to a man of a lower caste.

However, the plot twists when Krishnakanta, the man who presented Pitambar's marriage proposal, succeeds in convincing her with promises of financial rewards. Pitambar begins to see her on a regular basis after she accepts his proposal. She replied,

What could I do? I had to live. They even stopped their orders for sacred threads and puffed rice. They considered me impure, contaminated! And those tenants! They have turned thieves and don't give me my share of paddy. They take advantage of my helplessness. In these circumstances, where could I have gone with my two tiny daughters? I have not paid the land revenue. The land, too, will be auctioned off! What can I do? (77)

Simone de Beauvoir, a French existentialist and novelist best known for her book *The Second Sex*, conducted research on the factors that contribute to the subject of why women are repeatedly mistreated. She asserts:

In truth woman has not been socially emancipated through man's need - sexual desire and the desire for offspring—which makes the male dependent for satisfaction upon the female. (Beauvoir xxvi).

Through the portrayal of Pitambar's bedridden wife, Goswami draws our attention to the social oppression that every infertile woman has to undergo in Indian society. She cuts through the

raw and acrid reality of Indian culture, which reduces a woman to nothing more than the bearer of "the womb." If a woman does not have the ability to have children, then she is nothing more than a burden on society and a constant source of resentment, scorn, and accusations that never cease. This is the highest talent that women possess, and it is the sole reason why women are respected. Pitamber's bedridden wife bears the brunt of her husband's wrath because she is unable to bear children; "you barren bitch!" he mocks her spitefully.

Goswami focuses on the subordination of women in Brahmin culture in general and the marginalisation of widows in particular in her book *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. Her descriptions of the Brahmin culture, where widows were seen as sinners, were vivid. They were excluded from any auspicious events in their family or elsewhere since they were thought to be unlucky. They lived out the rest of their lives within the confines of the house, never looking out onto the street. Durga served as a metaphor for these silently tolerating characters in the book. In reality, she internalized everything and acquiesced to all her in-laws had done to her. Another conformist, Sari Gossainee, comforted a dejected Durga after her gold jewels were taken, saying that it is fate that they were born as women and they should develop the patience and tolerance necessary to live peacefully. Though the lives of the widow Gosainnees were harrowing it seemed that they had swallowed the bitter pill knowing that there wouldn't be any other alternative other than life-long imprisonment. Diseases and poverty had a devastating effect on them; enough to shatter them into uncountable broken pieces and with all oddities and anomalies and chastisements, they were leading a life of covert distress. In the case of Giribala, her mother-in-law's torture had outstripped all limits:

this is the reason why her unborn child was destroyed in her womb...why, she was not even allowed to go to latrine during amoti!...and she could get down from her cot only after wearing betelnut bark sandals on her feet. (30)

The deplorable plight of the women who are responsible for maintaining the patriarchal Brahmin culture has been brought to the forefront by Goswami. The community kept its finger to its lips when it came to the instance of a polygamous man, but it lifted the same finger to curse the lady who continued to engage in the same behaviour even after her husband had passed away. A Gossain was allowed to have an affair with a woman from a lower caste, but a Gossainee was strictly forbidden even to think about such a thing, and those who did so had to go through a series of cleansing ceremonies. Indeed, the story does an excellent job of depicting all of these elements in a clear and concise manner.

Giribala, a widow in the patriarchal Gossain community, is presented by Goswami as a unique individual who defies societal standards. After she became a widow, the women of the neighbourhood gathered at her ancestral home to console her and commiserate over her recent hardships. In the end, Giribala was unable to take it, and she stormed out of the puja room, tearing the door off its hinges like a roaring tiger. Her tresses had become untangled and were flying in every direction. It appeared as though her garb had been thrown all over the place after her gatala had been removed. She screamed,

“I am alive! I will live on and have a better life than all of you...” She was not happy with her conjugal life. Her husband had lots many affairs. She remembered his words: Since we are already married...you’ll have to tolerate some of my habits...I love women. I like their company. (Goswami 140).

This caused her a great deal of pain. She did not feel any sympathy for him, and as a result, her eyes did not have even the slightest trace of sadness for her deceased spouse. Whenever she thought of him, she immediately recalled his affair with the woman from Maniari Chowk, who belonged to a lower caste. She was not a conventional Gossain widow but rather a transgressor who did not want to survive only for the purpose of keeping her life. She did not have any affection for her late husband, who had caressed and played with that notorious lady who sold

opium, and she did not wish to walk in Durga's footsteps. She was a Gossain widow, but not in the traditional sense. Her innermost being whispered to Mark 'Sahib—Oh, please! Take me out of this wooden coffin! Please! I beg you' (153). Giribala was a non-conformist, unlike Durga. She was a fresh character who sought emancipation and a happy existence, unlike Durga and Saru Gossainee. She transgressed the seemingly insurmountable boundaries that curtail the freedom of a widow. When she smelled exquisite mutton curry, she forgot everything—religion, traditions, wisdom, and restraint—and started gulping it down. Mark Sahib was a ray of hope and resilience in the midst of despair for Giribala; he was a kind of saviour who could free her because of his selfless service to the hungry, impoverished, and oppressed. Mark alone could provide her with biological requirements, but he understood his boundaries and resisted touching her. By the end of the story, she had forcibly entered his hovel amid a storm. She said, 'I will not go back to that graveyard! I don't want to be buried alive. I'd rather die' (Goswami 295). He had to satisfy her bodily demands. She was pulled out and purified after being detected as having illegal contact with a low-caste man. But, the rebellious Giribala, a "new-woman" refused and burned herself in the purifying hut.

Analogous to Giribala's temperament, is the disposition of Saudamini, a widow who refused to be a bird imprisoned in a cage. *The Blue-Necked God*, the novel in which Saudamini plays an unforgettable role, takes place in Vrindavan and focuses on the exploitation and deprivation of widows who have been abandoned by their families and left in a sacred city to eke out their lives in meditation on God. These widows are deserted by their families under the guise of religious sanction and tradition. But Goswami has given birth to a new generation of women through the character of Saudamini who defied authority and did not follow the rules in her everyday life. Her natural inquisitiveness led her to wander down the restricted street against her better judgement. She went wherever she was told not to, and she did everything that was forbidden to her. Her father wished for her to devote the remainder of her life to

helping others who were ill or in need, but she preferred living a life of independence. She voiced her disapproval and insisted on having her independence respected:

I cannot spend my entire life like this, doing charity work... I am not a devi, I am an ordinary girl, and cannot pass all my years in serving society like you... I am an independent person, and dear no one and nothing! (71)

Goswami's daring exhibition of the challenges and vicissitudes confronted by women serves as a pertinent reminder of Deepa Mehta's film *Water* which depicts the precarious situation faced by Hindu widows in India during the 1930s. It also depicts the monotony and isolation of the lives of a group of widows who are shunned by society and forced to live together in a widow's house. Without a spouse to rely on for support, these women are often forced to resort to prostitution or beg to make ends meet. Mehta depicts the Hindu institution of widowhood as a system that victimises its individuals, especially the protagonists like Chuyia and Kalyani. Hindu law and religious standards have been so conventionalized that widows have no choice but to isolate themselves from society and lead a solitary, ridiculous existence in widow ashrams. Chuyia and Kalyani are only two examples of widows who have been forced into prostitution by the ashram's financial woes and the affluent Brahmins who control them. Stephen Hunter, a critic, says that this is now the widows' job, and he uses the following to back up his claim:

Even as reform seems close at hand, traditional obligations impose tragedy upon the ashram [as] one of the duties of the widows is to perform the occasional act of the prostitution, to keep the economic enterprise afloat: thus Kalyani is selected for job [...] Even worse is the fate that awaits the irrepressible Chiyia. (1)

Mehta's primary motivation in producing this social record on the topic of widowhood is to expose the dehumanisation and injustice faced by widows as a result of the widow system.

In the film, Kalyani falls in love with an educated Gandhian idealist named Narayan, though she isn't ignorant to the fact that the widow system does not allow her to remarry and also that thinking about any man other than her husband is considered a contemptible deed. Narayan loves her, and he feels she should get married, which is seen as a brave and risky move by society. Even though their union would be frowned upon by the majority, they cannot help but celebrate their love. Kalyani learns in the film's climactic fall that Narayan's father was the one who forced her into prostitution. She decides to end her life because she is disgusted and frustrated with the never-ending miseries and wants to die a natural death in the ocean. Thus, our protagonists, Chuiya and Kalyani accept the inevitable result of the widowhood system. A movie reviewer named William Arnold writes this on the patriarchal structure of society,

It is a tragic love story that fearlessly attacks the enslaving hypocrisy of patriarchal tradition that has developed over thousands of years of socio-economic imperatives and now disguises itself as religion. (5)

Deepa Mehta exposes the theological, bourgeois, and patriarchal foundations that relegate widows to the position of living deeds in the film, offering a potent indictment of the Hindu widow system. Yet, she also illustrates how such dogmas may be subverted by bringing up the subject of widow marriage.

Even in the present, when the world has witnessed an unprecedented rate of prosperity, many people still believe that marriage is an institution that promotes slavery and that women should be subservient to their husbands. Uma Narayan in *Dislocating Culture* divulges her perspective regarding this matter and hence writes:

I would argue that my sense, that marriage is an oppressive institution for any women is something that predates my explicit acquisition of a feminist politics, and is something I initially learned not from books but from women in general and my relatives in particular. (9)

Quite derisively, Narayan projects his opinion about marriage that it is an institution in which husbands wish to exercise supremacy over women and demand unquestionable devotion from them. Marriage has thus become an oppressive rite for women since they are forced to live a life of chastity and self-denial after their spouses die. Though the atrocious practice of Sati has been abolished, women are still burning in the fire of mental self-immolation, if not physical immolation. Indira Goswami's literary world not only delineates disadvantaged women but also shows that women have internalised their marginalisation and silently accepted their destiny for generations. However, amidst these female characters who unprotestingly embraced a life of social and mental oppression, Giribala and Saudamini are two such female characters who shouted for their freedom and chose suicide over incarceration. Goswami's Giribala from *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* and Saudamini from *The Blue-Necked God* are non-conformist and unconventional characters who challenged patriarchal rules that exploited and marginalised women. They ignored religious prohibitions, challenged gender norms, and demanded autonomy as New Women pioneers. They both committed suicide by the end of the novels, but their suicides seemed to symbolise their release from widowhood, unutterable pain, and mental immolation.

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