



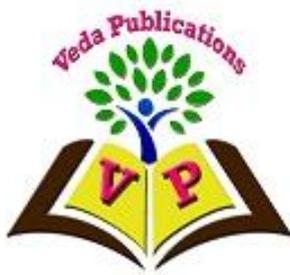
“FUNERAL RITES”: A STUDY OF WIDOW AS SUBALTERN

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ABSTRACT



Widows are among the poorest and the most vulnerable segment of the society as their status in the society, family and community at large is that of destitution, marginalisation and oppression. The term ‘subaltern’ means someone who is low in rank in a social, political or other hierarchy. The term is associated with the ostracised section of the society particularly used for the weaker section of the society i.e. women. The position of female as subaltern is miserable. Patriarchy is the prime obstacle to women’s advancement and development. Among women, widows are the doubly oppressed as they become the prey of patriarchy as well as of religion. Widows are forced to live in a socially ostracized, economically dependent life. The paper attempts to discuss the position of widows as subaltern in the society.

Keywords: *Women, Widow, Subaltern, Patriarchy, Economic Crisis.*

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A widow is taunted as 'man-eater' or 'husband-eater' and it is really very difficult for her to survive in a patriarchal society. The society set as a patriarchal institution condemns widows to live a life of isolation and vulnerability. The widows in society are facing neglect and a sense of loneliness and feeling of abandonment. They are often deprived of their rights, survive in poverty and remain uncared in the society. The dreams, hopes and the basic rights of a widow to lead a dignified life are blocked by multiple forces of oppression and treated as 'subaltern.' This term is coined by Antonio Gramsci in his work on cultural hegemony. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita describe the pathetic plight of widows as:

Once the husband dies, the torture of his wife begins, as if the messengers of the death God Yama themselves have come to take away her soul. None of the relatives will touch her to take her ornament off her body. That task is assigned to three women from the barber caste. Their number varies from three to six. No sooner does the husband breathe his last than those female fiends literally jump all over her and violently tear all the ornaments from her nose, ears, etc. In that rush, the delicate bones of the nose and ears are sometimes broken. Sometimes, while plucking the ornaments from her hair, tufts of hair also plucked off. If she is wearing any gold or silver ornaments, these cruel women never have the patience to take them off one by one: they pin her hands down on the ground and try to break the bangles with a large stone. Why this callous women torture even a six-or seven-year-old girl, who doesn't even know what a husband means when she becomes a widow. (359)

The story "Funeral Rites" tells the sufferings and subjugation of widow and also analyses and discusses about the misinterpretation of the social taboos, patriarchy which according to the author are the root cause of the misery of women in general and widows in particular. The story tells us about the social world of a widow who faces complexions in her life. She suffers not only because of her poverty and bourgeoisie ideology and suppression of the labour but also because of patriarchal stereotyping and

tabooing. Patriarchy is an obstacle which hinders the path of women's development. Widows face a lot of traditional constraints. They are often deprived of their rights, survive in poverty and remain uncared in the society.

The story "Funeral Rites" is written by Narendra Khajuria, the story is about a child widow Bhaagan, who is only fourteen years old. After the death of her husband her life becomes tough. She is a poor girl and for performing the funeral rites of her husband she has to take loan and that loan ruins her life. Her desperate and pathetic condition is very clearly shown in the story. Bhaagan has taken loan from Bajia, who is a corrupt man and always put heavy taxes on her loan. Bhaagan is a poor lady and never manage to pay the loan back as she is always paying the tax of her loan as well as the loan of her husband which she has taken from Bajia to perform the funeral rites of his mother.

Bhaagan, a little widow without any money has only one cow and little farm and her hope is lying only upon it. She gave birth to her son Murku, but not able to manage to provide food and milk for him. Her son is the only hope of her life. Bhaagan is an innocent and simple lady and everybody befools her for their own benefit. She has to manage the possession of her farm on her name and for that Munshi is demanding a bribe of one rupee from her. She states in a pathetic voice: "Munshi ji, a widow as I am, I don't have even a single paisa to take poison, it is a long time that I have seen a rupee coin" (17).

One day Bajia came to her come and with a taunt he said to Baaghan that you are not able to pay the loan. No, I will leave your interest on the loan and you have to pay only the loan which is twenty-nine rupees as you are not able to pay it. I am taking your cow with me. Bajia doesn't find anything else in her home so, he orders that from tomorrow your son Murku will work for me and graze my cattle and live there. I will give him food and his salary will be deducted as the rest of the amount of loan. The story shows that all the power and authority within the family and in the society remains entirely in the hands of men and women is always kept in periphery. Widows are the 'doubly marginalised'. They lead a socially dead life where they have no right to express their desires. Hartmann defines



patriarchy as, "... set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchal relations between men and solidarity among them which enable them in turn to dominate women... patriarchy is not simply hierarchal but hierarchy in which particular people fill particular places" (103).

Bhagaan left in utter dejection. Her only hope of life has been taken from her. She became a desolate widow again. But she suppress her feeling and prepare Murku to go to Bhajia's home. She questions, "Murku! Will you be in Bhajia service from tomorrow"(20)? This question is not for Murku but she asks this question from herself for which she has no answer. The innocent Murku don't know the meaning of living there and is excited on his going. Their conversation shows the desperate feeling of Bhagaan. As she states:

Be careful about your work there. If ever you want to sit, find a distant corner and sit on bare floor. And when Bajia has a visitor, or someone high caste person passes you by, bid him 'I fall on your feet.' Do you understand, my son? We are lowly people and have to live in the shadows of high-caste people!

But Amma, why we are lowly?

It is because we are poor, my son.

Then why we are poor, Amma?

It is because God has made us poor, my son.

Who is this God? What wrong we have done with him?

Why has he made us poor? (22)

The story presents that how desperate she is on her condition that she tells her son that the real cause of their problems is poverty. Bhagaan sends him to Bajia's house and after that she left all alone. This loss is unbearable for her and she falls unconscious. In her dreams she saw herself drowning in pool with other people and some ships which are approaching to them to save them. But, these shipmen are busy in collecting pearls and Bhaagan states, "Please come to save us. We people are not anything for you, only money matters for you" (23). But, they don't come and she drowns in her dream. She comes to senses after seeing this dream and her whole body is sweating. The loss of Murku to Bajia is a great loss for her and in this grief she loses her life.

The study analyses that the widow has to undergo a harsh life. The life becomes all the more difficult for a young widow. There are so many socio-religious restrictions on the widow which ruins their life. The storypoint out several facts regarding the socio-economic conditions; and also suggest some do-able actions for their betterment. Widows are doubly marginalized; they became the prey of patriarchy as well as religion. Widows are force to live a socially ostracized, economically dependent and psychically austere life. Widows live a socially dead life where they have no right to express their feelings, desires and dreams.

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